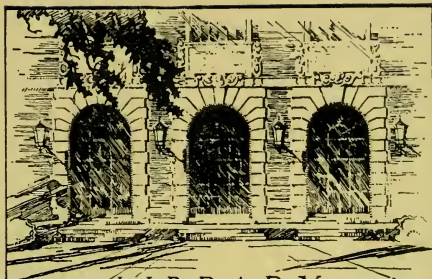


"Driven before the Storm"
by Gertrude Forder





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DRIVEN BEFORE THE STORM.

VOL. II.

DRIVEN BEFORE THE STORM

BY

GERTRUDE FORDE,

AUTHOR OF

"A LADY'S TOUR IN CORSICA," "IN THE OLD PALAZZO,"
ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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DRIVEN BEFORE THE STORM.

CHAPTER I.

CROSSED SWORDS.

‘ God ofttimes would enrich,
But finds not where to place
His treasure—nor in hand
Nor heart a vacant place.’—OLD MSS.

THE next day Barrington returned to town by the mid-day train. He was more in love than ever ; but inclined to take Mr. Brereton’s opposition with a good-humoured indifference, in the face of his happy conviction that no earthly influence would be likely to shake Nell’s constancy. He was

only sorry for her, poor child, having to undergo harassing discussions and perhaps petty persecutions on the score of her engagement ; but he felt clear that all this would in time blow over, and he and his *fiancée* be able to see each other, as was fitting, at her own home. For the present, however, they must content themselves with the prospect of meeting shortly in the house of a friend near London, where Nell was engaged to pay a visit, and where he had promised to call upon her.

Meanwhile, Barrington was once more in his London chambers, seeing a good many friends, and dining out a good deal, but employed also in some business transactions, which took up a fair amount of time and thought. These transactions had for basis the effort he was making to understand more exactly the condition of his own

affairs, pecuniary and otherwise ; and to see how far it would be feasible and advisable, in the event of his marriage, for him to take up his permanent abode at his childhood's home. He had every confidence in the lawyer who had charge of his affairs ; and until now had made no great attempt to comprehend legal details or precise facts and figures. But now he felt it was a different matter. He must know exactly how far he was correct in believing himself to be in a position to marry a woman accustomed to every refinement and luxury of life ; and also whether it would be in his power to bring her to the home where undoubtedly she would be likely to hold a better position than elsewhere.

The result of his investigations was on the whole a cheering one.

All his father's creditors had been satis-

fied, and one or two of the principal mortgages on the property paid off. The present income was not a large one, but it was upon the increase; and, with care in his expenditure, there was no reason why he should not return to his father's county, and to the family home.

These details were in their course duly transmitted to Mr. Brereton, who received them politely, but with a guarded caution. That they were not without their effect, however, was shown by the fact that Nell began now to hint at the possibility of an invitation arriving soon for him to the Cedars, and to speak of her step-father's opposition as gradually dying away into a mere querulous irritability. She did not, however, tell him how hard a battle she had fought to wring this invitation from Mr. Brereton; nor how bitter had been the

sneers of her step-brother when informed of the intention. It was quite curious to note the exceeding antipathy felt by Robert Brereton towards De Witt. He would probably, however, have experienced small cordiality towards any man aspiring to be Nell's husband; and this for substantial although not highly honourable reasons.

If Mr. Brereton were fond of money, his son Robert was mean and covetous; if the father were irritable and unpleasant-tempered, the son was morose and vindictive. He was his father intensified and narrowed, mentally and morally——the type which, in the elder man, was not a lofty one, in the younger was still further debased.

Mr. Brereton was close in regard to money matters, but to a certain degree he was just and honourable; it is more than doubtful whether this could be said of

Robert, who moreover was extravagant and even dissipated—unknown to the elder man, who was strict to severity, as the other knew, on all matters pertaining to morality.

It was undoubtedly a sore point with Mr. Brereton to contemplate the loss of his step-daughter's income from the general fund, justly as he told himself he had applied it to her sole use and benefit; but to Robert, who foresaw, at her departure, a shortened allowance, fewer horses to ride, a less luxuriously appointed table—and to whom all these things meant the very essence of life, the enjoyments for which he existed, it was a fact to be regarded with unmitigated anger and disgust.

But this was not all. His dislike was not general only; it was also personal. It was Barrington's usual fate to go through life making many friends and few enemies;

but, in this case, perhaps the very qualities which gave him popularity with the world at large, had most excited the animosity of Robert Brereton. Much as the latter declared he despised society, yet in his heart he most hated those men, whose unlikeness to himself made them most shine in society; and De Witt's easy good-breeding, as much as his good looks and imperturbable sweet temper, he felt to be, on all occasions when they had been in each other's company, a most undesirable and humiliating foil to his own manners and appearance. Then, too, despite the good-humoured politeness of Barrington's tone and manner, he had somehow arrived at a suspicion of the light in which the other really regarded him. I suppose the poorest nature is not beneath some faint desire for its own good opinion and the good opinion of others;

and probably the least gentlemanly man breathing would rather not be thought a cad.

Be that as it may, Robert Brereton did not love his future brother-in-law; and the latter might be said to reciprocate the feeling thoroughly after his own fashion.

John Ponsonby had been a frequent caller at Barrington's rooms, as frequent at least as his now busy career would permit him to be. The two had taken to each other first in the Naples hotel, and now renewed the intimacy, smoking many a quiet cigar over De Witt's fire, or dining together snugly at Ponsonby's club, preparatory to an evening stroll, or the seeing of a new play.

Ponsonby amused his friend considerably one night. He was often amusing, but usually consciously so. To-night he provided his companion with entertainment

of an involuntary nature, as he sat stretching his legs out towards the pleasant blaze, and enjoying, with a sybaritic calm, the warm room with its heavy curtains that shut out the remains of a dull October day.

John Ponsonby was erratic in all his movements, and he now suddenly leapt to his feet and bent over the mantelpiece.

‘Who’s that?’ he asked, indicating a vignette photograph that adorned the mirror. ‘What a beautiful face, by Jove! You hadn’t that here before, De Witt.’

‘I’m glad you like her,’ said Barrington smiling; ‘for she is a great friend of mine.’

‘Not your *fiancée*?’

‘Rather not!’

‘I don’t see any rather about it. You might be proud enough if she were.’

Barrington broke into a peal of laughter

—laughter which was so infectious, because he always seemed to enjoy it so much himself—but John Ponsonby looked at him puzzled and half-frowning.

‘Don’t be hot about it, old fellow! I’m a great admirer of hers too, I assure you, though she isn’t my *fiancée*. But she’s single, if you like to try your chance. Only I warn you she is older than you.’

‘Really?’ asked the other. ‘Then this photograph has been taken some time?’

‘No, only last year. She doesn’t look a day older than that; and she *is* very pretty. But I couldn’t very well marry her, John, seeing that she is my aunt.’

‘Your aunt! Impossible!’

Barrington burst into another peal.

‘Poor old Pon! Don’t look so disappointed. Wait till you see her. I believe it’s a real case of love at first sight.’

Ponsonby returned to his seat, first administering a shake *en passant* to his friend's shoulder.

‘Stop that guffawing, you fool you! I never saw such a fellow as you for enjoying jokes that no one else sees.’

‘I so seldom have the chance of laughing at you, Ponsonby. You barristers are too sharp to be caught often. You're so accustomed to make everybody else ridiculous that it's extra sweet to turn the tables on you.’

An hour later, when Ponsonby rose to go, taking another cigar from Barrington's box to console him on his way, he turned for one more glance at the photograph.

‘I wonder now,’ he remarked speculatively, ‘how it came to pass that a woman with a face like that remained unmarried?’

‘Not for want of the asking, I imagine,’

replied Barrington with a smile ; for a man in love is apt to drop some of the more conceited dogmas of his sex.

‘I suppose she was hard to please,’ said Ponsonby, as he struck a fusee.

‘She hadn’t seen you then, my dear fellow, you know!’

‘And she’s your aunt ! Good Heavens !’

‘Well, she isn’t so very old for all that.’

‘What does she do with herself?’

‘Well, till the last two years she was always busy nursing an invalid mother. Now, she’s dead, and Aunt Judy lives with a widowed friend of hers in Kensington.’

‘Aunt Judy ! Good Lord !’ ejaculated his companion, as he slowly lit his cigar and turned to go, indifferent to Barrington’s amused countenance.

A day or two after this De Witt called at the house of the friend with whom Miss

Lingwood was staying, and who, having been put *au fait* of the latter's engagement, good-naturedly planned so that the two should spend several hours together; and here Nell informed him that he was expected shortly at her own home, and that even now a letter was on its way, she believed, containing Mr. Brereton's invitation. Sir Simon, she said, had written a most kind and cordial note of congratulation to his old acquaintance, Mr. Brereton, speaking in terms of affection of his young cousin; and this incident it was, Nell thought, which had finally broken down the last straw of opposition, and convinced her step-father that he must openly countenance the engagement.

The next morning the letter arrived; and a week later saw De Witt on his way from Town to the little station of Cotswold Moors.

A carriage and pair met him this time, and he drove up in state to the Cedars, Mr. Brereton greeting him upon his arrival after a fashion that was perfectly civil if not exactly cordial, whilst Mrs. Brereton, no longer obliged to warp her natural inclinations by the force of circumstances and the pressure of her husband's will, at once resumed a kindly, almost affectionate, manner. She was the most lenient and good-natured of chaperones; indeed she seemed inclined to consider chaperonage scarcely necessary betwixt Nell and her affianced lover, and let the two young people manage matters pretty much as it pleased them. Mr. Brereton, it seemed to De Witt, spent the greater part of the day in his study, transacting magistrate's business or writing letters. His only other occupation of interest appeared to be an

incessant criticism, generally unfavourable, of the mode in which the cook sent up the details of the breakfast or dinner, on which subject he worried his wife a good deal. He troubled Barrington little, however, rarely addressing him except during meal-times, when the conversation of every one was apt to be a little stiff and disjointed. The only member of the household who in any way interfered with the enjoyment of the two was Robert; and neither of them could have told why it was that Robert was such a perpetual thorn in the flesh to both.

Robert never opened a book, and had no private den to which to retire; hence, except when out with his gun, he was usually to be seen with his hands in his pockets standing before the fireplace or gazing out of the window, or maybe

wandering aimlessly from room to room with no apparent purpose.

He was more taciturn than ever in De Witt's presence; and the latter felt intuitively that he hated him. He seemed to have a talent—perhaps the only one he possessed—of conveying insult by his manner, and a sneer by his looks, whilst avoiding open or verbal incivility.

At first Barrington took little notice of this; but, as by degrees he observed more of the nature of the young man, he came to the conclusion that Robert was not merely an unpleasant companion, but that he could also be a dangerous opponent. There was more of cunning and of a certain low ability about him than Barrington had at first supposed. He was, he began to think, less foolish and more vicious than he had at first appeared to be. He

began to avoid Nell's step-brother, and to address him as little as possible ; and he sometimes found himself engaged in a half-contemptuous scrutiny of the latter, which was possibly perceptible to its object.

Nell was sorry to see the growing dislike between the two young men ; but how could she blame her *fiancé* ? He was always polite outwardly to Robert, as to every one ; and could she be astonished if the expression of his features manifested feelings which in her heart she fully shared ? Mrs. Brereton, however, before whom perhaps Robert may have displayed his more unreserved animosity, was frightened by the strength of the latter's dislike, and greatly dreaded her husband's making the discovery of this reciprocal and unfortunate sentiment, which, with her usual good-natured but not

over-wise mode of tactics, she strove to disguise or to smooth over.

Matters, however, after a while culminated, and determined De Witt to bring his visit to a somewhat abrupt conclusion. The climax came about on this wise. He was seated one morning on the stile leading from the park towards the wood, smoking an early cigar, when he noticed Will Barrett approaching from the direction of the cottage. The young gamekeeper had his head bent downwards, and he did not seem to observe Barrington at first.

‘Good morning,’ said the latter, with a friendly nod, ‘where are we going to shoot to-day?’

Will glanced up hastily, and De Witt saw that his face was crimson, and his eyes full of a suppressed rage.

He stood still, touching his cap instinctively; but it was clear that he had not heard the question addressed to him.

‘Are you a friend of the young squire up there?’ he asked, with uncontrollable passion, pointing with his thumb towards the Cedars.

De Witt removed his cigar from his lips, and gazed at him in astonishment without replying. The young man was usually so civil, that, although reported to be of a violent temper, the transformation of his ordinary quiet taciturn manner was startling.

‘Because, if you are,’ he continued, in the same tone, ‘you may warn him not to go hanging about our house any more, or he’ll pay for it!’

And before Barrington had time to reply, he was off, and had disappeared down one of the winding paths with a rapid, angry stride.

The incident made an impression, as was natural, upon De Witt's mind ; but he kept it to himself for some days, drawing his own conclusions of the truth—conclusions necessarily unflattering to Robert Brereton. It was no part of his duty to bestow upon that young man a warning which might possibly have, for sole result, the dismissal of Will Barrett from his situation. His sympathies entirely sided with the young gamekeeper, who, moreover, excited his amused pity by the nervous civility of his manner on the next occasion of their coming into contact with each other.

Poor Will seemed to have repented heartily of his temporary display of passion, and to be terribly afraid lest Barrington should deliver him up to judgment. His politeness became almost servile to the guest, and brought a smile to the lips of the

latter, after the first incident had almost faded from his memory.

A few days later, however, it recurred to his mind. It was on a damp, chilly afternoon—too raw a day for Nell, who had a slight cold, to go out—when, returning homewards from a solitary stroll with his gun, two or three birds in his pocket, he saw coming towards him down the avenue, Robert Brereton and Lucy Barrett, side by side. There was no by-path of any sort; but, on perceiving his approach, the young girl broke away hastily from her companion, and fled onwards, passing De Witt without recognition, and with a shamefaced air. Robert paused a moment in deliberation; then he turned leisurely to go homewards, his pace so slow that De Witt could scarcely avoid coming up with him.

The latter, however, had taken his reso-

lution, and, as he reached young Brereton, paused and walked beside him. Something about the pretty, terrified face of the poor child who had scudded past him like a frightened hare, seemed to appeal to his sense of manliness, to his protection. To any man worth his salt, who is in love, all women become, after a fashion, as sisters—the honour of all and every one is sacred.

He felt his task the easier as he glanced towards the countenance of his companion, rendered even less attractive than usual by its undisguised temper.

‘Why don’t you let that girl alone?’ he asked tersely. ‘You will have an account to settle with her brother some day, I expect, if you don’t look out.’

‘Why don’t you mind your own business?’ retorted the other.

‘It’s every man’s business to keep a nice

girl from being ruined,' was the prompt reply.

Robert Brereton's face, as he turned it towards his companion, was not pleasant to see.

De Witt had not thought it capable of so much energy of expression ; and for a moment it almost raised his opinion of the young man to find he had it in him to go into a rousing passion.

' You whitewashed, insufferable dandy ! ' he exclaimed, throwing off all disguise of the feelings he entertained towards De Witt ; ' what do you mean by interfering in my affairs ? Do you think I want your advice how to conduct myself ? '

Barrington shrugged his shoulders with a contemptuous smile.

' You will do as you please, of course,' he said. ' I have given you my warning.'

‘And who cares for your warning, do you think? Doesn’t your own game content you?—establishing yourself in my father’s house, and never speaking a civil word to him or me——’

‘You don’t suppose that I came down for the pleasure of seeing *you*?’ asked De Witt.

But his calmness only seemed to add fuel to the flames of the other’s fury.

‘No,’ he retorted, ‘I’m not quite such a fool as to think that. I saw your game at Capri. You ain’t the first fortune-hunter I’ve met—with all your hypocritical moralities!’

De Witt stood a moment before him in the path, barring the way. A slight flush had risen to his sunburnt cheek, but his tone was quieter than ever.

‘That will do,’ he said, looking down upon his companion from his superior

height; 'no more of that, if you please. Leave out allusions to—to Miss Lingwood. I have no wish to kick you as you deserve, because you cannot help being an unmitigated snob; but, if you bring in her name again, I will knock you head over heels into that brushwood! So look out.'

Robert stuttered, and, for a moment, looked as if he was inclined to strike at his companion; but if so, he thought better of the temptation, and with a muttered curse walked on. De Witt allowed him to pass, and turning back, sought another, longer, route to the house.

It was not a comfortable idea to have to return to the Cedars; it is not an agreeable thing to sit at the dinner-table opposite your host's son, directly after informing him that you consider him an unmitigated snob, and have offered to

knock him over ; but, under certain circumstances, it is a discomfort which has to be endured.

Barrington, however, at once decided to leave the house the next day ; a decision not affected by the fact that the other members of the Brereton family party clearly as yet knew no more of the fracas between the two, than might be guessed from the more than usually savage acerbity of Robert's manner at table. After De Witt's departure, no doubt he might possibly make capital out of the quarrel ; but, for the present, he evidently and wisely dreaded the origin of the dispute reaching his father's ears.

So Barrington, unwilling to state the truth, had to make what excuses he could ; a course which was rendered the easier by the fact that he had already remained

almost as long as he intended with his *fiancée's* relations. Nell, however, guessed the facts at once, and taxed him with them.

‘You and Robert have fallen out,’ she exclaimed, when he informed her of his intended departure the following day. ‘I knew it must come to that soon.’

But Barrington would give her no answer but a smile.

‘Don’t you think I’ve been here long enough?’ he asked. ‘I’m afraid I have tired every one out but you, Nell. But I shall be down again in December. I can’t do longer than that without a sight of you.’

‘You will come to this house, Barrington?’

‘I think not, my darling. I shall probably put up at the village inn, and come over to see you every day. And I will bring down my horse, and we will have some rides together.’

Nell made no reply, but her face looked a little sad and wistful; and he planted a kiss upon the thoughtful frown that marked the white forehead.

‘And then in March, my queen—no more separation, no more village inns, no more Roberts after that! What a shame it should be March—why couldn’t it be December?’

‘Yes, I think of that time, Barrington, when I feel I am losing patience and growing angry with these people who don’t care for you. I say to myself it is only a little test—and perhaps a useful one. I must not grow irritable with them, and let myself be soured in temper; nor must I worry over it, for fear it should make me grow old and ugly in face! And oh, Barrington, I know I have a naughty temper, and I *do* worry—how I wish I were like you, who are always sweet-tempered.’

‘Don’t, my darling,’ he whispered, as he took her in his arms; ‘you humiliate me by talking so. It makes me feel sad to leave you, my Nell—I know your home is not as happy a one as it might be.’

‘Dear mother means to be kind, Barrington; she cannot help being swayed by papa in everything; and it is better for her that she should not have an obstinate nature, like me. But I am happy, dear. So long as we are one I can never be anything else.’

‘God bless you!’ he said softly; and for a little while they sat on in the gathering twilight of the autumn day, in a silence full of that sweet unspoken sympathy which must surely be the speech of heaven.

CHAPTER II.

A FATEFUL MEETING.

‘ No rush of the mournful waters
Breaks on the ear—
To tell us, when life is strongest,
That death flows near.’—B. M.

It was a beautiful January day—such a day as our continental neighbours, as well as many of ourselves, are in the habit of considering the exclusive property of the genial South, but which are, nevertheless, not so uncommon to England—clear, bright and sunny, with a blue sky and a suspicion of frost, but not a suspicion of wind to accentuate the frost.

To De Witt—in the prime of life and

health, going to meet the girl he loved, rich in friends, devoid of cares, and anticipating a happy future—it seemed as if the crisp brilliancy of the afternoon, so congenial to his cheerful mood, excelled in beauty that of any previous winter's day; and as he walked along the country lanes leading towards the Cedars, he alternately whistled and sang, every now and then sliding with boyish energy down some more propitious-looking rut or other that gave a faint indication of ice.

Waif, as usual, shared his companion's mood—for never was dog more completely one with his master than this dog—career-ing back and forwards with an utterly lost sense of dignity, and giving vent to an occasional sharp, short bark of pure enjoyment, as he madly circled round, in true colley-wise.

They were now approaching the drive and plantation; and as De Witt vaulted the stile leading into the grounds, he recalled with a smile the last parting between Nell and himself, when she had escorted him to this spot on his way to the station some weeks ago. Five weeks! It was a long time to have been without a sight of her sweet face. And still nearly three months before she would be his, for good and all.

What unnecessary delay, enforced merely for the satisfying of old Brereton's whims! Perhaps—poor old beggar—it did come rather rough on him to have to give up that thousand per annum; after twelve years ordering, it must seem a grievance to lose it. No wonder he did not look with eyes of overweening affection upon his future step-son-in-law. It was but human nature.

For his part, Barrington would have been quite willing to let him keep Nell's minority allowance—the residue of her fortune to come to her, according to the conditions of her father's will, on the attainment of her twenty-fourth birthday, was enough and more than he desired in the way of his wife's dowry ; but bequests, he knew, were not so easy to set aside, and wills have to be carried out. What was the exact amount of the girl's fortune he was even yet not quite clear ; but that he would have preferred it less, he honestly felt. He did not despise money, for—as has been justly said—none but fools do that ; but he cared little about the possession of wealth, especially when accruing to him from the side of the wife. He had always been in the habit of rather pitying men who married great heiresses, as placing themselves in an unpleasant

position ; and at first had experienced something of a repulsion against the fact in his own case. But he had ceased to think of it of late. He loved Nell too exclusively for herself to trouble himself any longer about extraneous matters such as these.

His arrival to-day was a little bit of a surprise to her. He had written to tell her he was coming down, but only the night before. He had preferred this course, intending, as he did, to put up at the village inn. Even had he been pressed to do so, he could not take up his quarters at the Cedars. Large house as it was, it was not large enough for himself and Robert Brereton.

At this moment he started, for a gun was fired off but a few paces from him, and the shot whistled almost around his ears, coming apparently from a side-path parallel with the main avenue down which

he walked. Into this path he turned aside quickly. Whatever sportsman were playing this foolish little game must be stopped—a dose of even small shot in the face would be neither agreeable nor strictly ornamental, either for himself or Waif.

Waif, by the bye, was out of sight for a moment; what was the dog doing?—was he getting into mischief?

Suddenly a voice fell upon his ear, and he turned the corner more rapidly, whilst his face took a new expression.

‘I’ll teach you to come poaching, you infernal hound!’ growled discordant tones; and as Waif leapt backwards to meet his master, De Witt came face to face with Robert Brereton, his gun still smoking, the elder keeper behind him.

De Witt pressed his lips together with an unusual movement.

‘Did you aim at my dog?’ he inquired in calm accents, with a dangerous light in his blue eyes.

‘I wish I’d hit him!’ was the amiable response.

‘Allow me then to tell you two things,’ observed the other, keeping his self-control with an effort. ‘In the first place, that he does not poach; and secondly, that it will be the worse for any one who injures him.’

‘Barrett has orders to shoot all dogs found trespassing,’ remarked Robert with a sneer; ‘so you had better look after him if you value him so highly. You know your orders, Barrett. I don’t care whose dog it is—if he comes poaching on these preserves, he’ll be shot.’

Barrington’s face had grown white with anger.

‘Touch him at your peril,’ he said turning

towards the gamekeeper. 'Possibly, however, you have more sense and courtesy than your master.'

Brereton marched up to his companion, fury depicted on his features.

'Leave my servants alone, will you?' he asked. 'And take your confounded insolence elsewhere.' He finished with an oath, and seemed more than half-inclined to strike the other, who stood before him with hands in his pockets, contemptuous and silent; when old Barrett interfered, stepping hastily between the two.

'Don't you be afraid, sir,' he remarked to De Witt; 'there won't no harm come to your dog through me.'

Like others of the servants, it was quite possible that he was not over-partial to his young master, and had himself suffered from his overbearing temper.

His intervention, however, was of service ; both young men paused, De Witt, followed by Waif, turning upon his heel and retracing his steps to the broad avenue ; whilst Robert, after glaring a moment savagely after the retreating figure, also continued his way in sullen silence.

De Witt paced on but slowly towards the house, for he was annoyed by this second encounter with his *fiancée's* step-brother. His wrath, always short and but rarely roused, had quickly faded ; and he began to take himself to task for the disturbance. It was impossible to keep on the right side of Robert ; that he knew, even had he keenly desired to do so ; but it would be more seemly and more agreeable to his feelings if he could manage to keep from open quarrelling, at any rate before his marriage. But could any one help quarrel-

ling with such a fellow—morose and mannerless as he was? Still, opportunities of provocation must be avoided.

‘So, Waif, my lad,’ said his master, as his hand rested on the dog’s silky head, ‘for the future, whilst in these parts, you must remain at the inn whenever I come Cedarswards. It is a pity, my boy, for we both prefer company, and there is a lady up there who is fond of you; but so it is, Waif, the ill-tempered govern the world, and tread down the good-natured and discreet, such as you and I.’

Waif in response merely wagged a bushy tail. He was somewhat sobered by the incident that had just occurred. He knew not why or wherefore he had given offence; but that there had been a row he understood well enough, and also that by some mischance or other he had been the cause of

it; and being by nature a peace-loving and gentlemanly dog, his spirits had dropped with his tail for the afternoon. He only recovered his self-possession after many compliments in the drawing-room on the part of the two ladies, accompanied by a saucer of milk and biscuits at afternoon tea.

Barrington was fortunate in finding his *fiancée* at home and disengaged. Mrs. Brereton invited him into her little boudoir up-stairs; then, with her usual amiability leaving the young couple to themselves for a long chat. She was kindness and cordiality itself, and pressed De Witt to send for his portmanteau and to take up his quarters at the house during his stay; nevertheless, he fancied he detected a shade of involuntary relief in her face and manner on his declining the invitation. She was a thoroughly honest woman, with the most

transparent of features, and he correctly divined that she was divided between three separate sentiments—a genuine personal liking for her son-in-law elect, a persuasion that it was scarcely *selon les convenances* that he should be located at the village inn, and a terror of collision between himself and Robert. The latter feeling predominated.

She seemed, however, sincerely disappointed that her visitor would not stay to dinner, which he promised to do on the following evening.

It seemed to him that, even with the faces of his hostess and his betrothed beside the board, he could scarcely manage as yet to enjoy a meal taken in the company of Robert Brereton. The young man's looks would turn the very wine sour, and make the viands indigestible.

It was a lovely starlight evening, still

and frosty ; and when, after having warmly shaken hands with Mrs. Brereton, he made his way to the front-door, Nell accompanied him.

‘I know why you won’t stop,’ she said softly, as they stood together in the silvery moonlight just outside ; ‘you and Robert have fallen out again.’

‘It is true, Nell ; we cannot keep the peace. And yet I never considered myself a quarrelsome fellow before.’

‘Who could help quarrelling with him ?’ she asked. ‘It is hard ; he drives you out of this house, Barrington.’

‘Never mind, my queen, we shall soon have a house of our own ; and no disagreeable person shall ever enter it, shall they ?’

‘It seems a long time off, Barrington. I never felt it so before.’

‘No, Nell. It was partly your doing, you know, that it was put off so long. It certainly was not my fault.’

‘I know, Barrington. And now I am sorry. I feel afraid of your going away again and leaving me here. Suppose some accident should happen to you in town? Suppose one of us were to die?’

His arm was round her.

‘Death is not the worst of separations, they say, my queen.’

‘It is the only thing that could divide *us*, Barrington.’

‘Don’t look so serious, my darling. I won’t be killed, if I can help it: life is too precious now.’

‘It makes one feel so unsafe,’ she murmured gently, ‘when one cares so much—too much, Barrington.’

‘Can one care too much?’ he asked, with

sudden seriousness. 'I do not think *I* can, for you, my queen. I have faith in you.'

Her beautiful eyes were raised to his.

'It is deserved,' she said quietly. 'Barrington, not even death could make me forget you—no persecution, no suffering could make us give each other up, could it?'

'Yet,' he said, half-dreamily, 'the highest form of human love is self-sacrifice, they say. Could I give you up, Nell, if it were for your good, I wonder?'

'How could it ever be?' she asked, with a shiver. 'Why, that would make my good a cruel evil! I could not live without you now, Barrington.'

'Oh, my darling, I am not worthy of such love!'

There was a long pause, whilst he held her silently in his arms. Then he suddenly broke the spell.

‘Why, queen, you will be taking cold; how thoughtless of me to keep you out here! One more kiss, Nell—how lovely you are! And give me a smile—the moonlight has infected us with romance—don’t let it make you sad. Good night, good night, my queen!’

And as she turned to go inwards, he ran gaily down the steps, whistling to his dog.

Five minutes later he was at the bottom of the avenue, about to pass over the stile leading into the cross-path that went beside the keeper’s cottage.

Suddenly he paused to listen, and Waif, listening too, pricked up his ears. The next moment De Witt had leapt the stile, and dashed into the woodland path. He had heard or fancied that he heard the distant cry of a frightened woman. And now words fell plainly enough upon his ear.

‘Oh, Mr. Robert, sir, leave me! Why do you persecute a poor girl so?’

And he hurried on more quickly, his cheek burning with indignation. There was the sound of a half-sob in Lucy Barrett’s voice, which was not lost upon him. The shadows in the wood were thick and black, and it was difficult to see his way; but he strode forwards, and in another moment, stood before them. Robert, who had been retaining a forcible hold upon her arm, obliging her to remain and listen to him, loosed his grasp at the unexpected interruption, and, without a moment’s pause, Lucy fled like a hunted hare down the chequered path.

For one moment the two men looked each other in the face without a word. Robert’s was pale with fury, De Witt’s flushed with disgust. The latter was the first to speak.

‘Don’t you think,’ he said, ‘that you must be a pretty cur to go on terrifying and insulting that poor child?’

‘What is that to you?’ asked Robert, his voice hoarse with passion.

‘It is a great deal to me. And if I can put a stop to it I will.’

‘How will you do that?’ asked the other, in the same tone.

‘I will find some way. Her father—or yours—shall hear of it.’

Robert’s response was totally unexpected.

An oath hissed for a moment between his teeth; then he aimed a blow straight between his companion’s eyes.

Somewhat surprised—for he had not believed Robert Brereton to be of the fighting order—De Witt had sufficient self-control to restrain the inclination he felt then and there to castigate the fellow as fully as he deserved; and stepping quickly back-

wards, evaded the blow. But, in retreating, his foot came in contact with a fallen tree, and he fell heavily to the ground, striking his head against the trunk. For a moment lights blazed before his eyes, and he was stunned—the next, he recovered consciousness, to find Waif anxiously licking his face and Robert out of sight. He rose somewhat giddily, and stumbled back towards the cottage-path. His face and neck were scratched with the sharp points of the broken twigs upon which he had fallen, and a drop or two of blood was trickling down his cheek, whilst his head felt heavy and stupid with the blow it had received. The fresh night air, however, was the best of restoratives; and before he had reached the village inn, he felt himself once more in possession of all his faculties. Being unwilling to display his injured condition to the curious eyes of landlord or waiter,

he there hurried up-stairs to his bed-room, where he washed off the stains; and after descending with but little appetite for his solitary steak, retired early to bed to sleep off his headache.

His bruises, however, did not pass unremarked by the polite but inquisitive little waiter.

‘Sorry to see that you’ve hurt yourself, sir,’ he remarked tentatively, as he placed a hot plate before the guest and fixed his eyes on Barrington’s face. The latter reddened and hesitated a moment. It would be extremely annoying to have any gossip concerning the ill-feeling existing between Robert Brereton and himself noised about the neighbourhood.

‘Yes,’ he replied, after a pause, ‘I got a nasty fall walking home. Caught my foot against a tree.’

‘Coming from the big ’ouse, sir?’ (For

so was the Cedars usually entitled by the rustic population round about ; every one in the inn being of course aware of the fact of the Captain's engagement to Miss Lingwood, the heiress of the big 'ouse.)

Barrington nodded his head. 'Nothing more, thanks,' he said, as he rose and retired. But, for a moment after his departure, the waiter stood and meditated beside the deserted fire in the sitting-room. The young gentleman was as sober as a judge when he came in—no doubt of that—yet, in this bright moonlight, shining like day, who could manage to lose his footing upon a path so clear and smooth as that leading from the Cedars hither? Quite incomprehensible. But not his affair. So the brisk little man filled his tray, shouldered his napkin, and ran down-stairs.

CHAPTER III.

GATHERING CLOUDS.

‘ Mightier far
Than strength of nerve or sinew, or the sway
Of magic potent over sun and star,
Is love, though oft to agony distrest,
And though his favourite seat be feeble woman’s
breast.’—WORDSWORTH.

THE next morning De Witt rose at his usual hour. Save for a slight feeling of stiffness, he was little the worse for his fall ; and, after short reflection, decided to walk over to the Cedars as usual before lunch. Why should he permit his proceedings to be disarranged on account of last night’s encounter ? It would be better to ignore the affair altogether—a course

which, there was little reason to doubt, would be followed by Robert, who would be the last person to wish for a general *éclaircissement*.

As for the scratches on his forehead and chin, those, if noticed, must be explained away in some way; but he could conceal most of them by means of well stroked-down hair.

Accordingly, having first imprisoned Waif in his bed-room, enjoining him, by way of consolation, to keep careful watch over a coat and other possessions, he set out on his walk, and as he did so, missed his stick.

He must have dropped it last night in the wood when he fell over that abominable trunk; he would turn aside for a moment on his way up to the house to see if he could discover it. He did so, but without result. The stick was not there, so far as

he could see ; but the long grass and ferns appeared, he noticed, to be a good deal trampled down, as if by many steps. He was just turning away, after wondering for a moment over this, when he was joined by old Barrett the gamekeeper, and two other men. De Witt remarked that the old man, usually so civil, forgot to touch his cap, and appeared to look at him askance.

‘Bad doings here last night, sir,’ he said, half nervously, fixing his gaze upon the other’s face.

Barrington could not but suppose he referred to something connected with Robert and himself, and, being unwilling to gossip on such a subject, began to move off, inquiring carelessly,

‘What doings?’

The elder man paused a moment.

‘Well, sir,’ he said at length, ‘they do say as you ought to know about that better nor we!’

Upon which one of his companions nudged him.

Feeling annoyed, De Witt walked on without answer, when, to his astonishment, the three men followed him.

‘Was it true, sir,’ asked Barrett, ‘as you had words with Mr. Robert here last night at this spot?’

De Witt suddenly turned and faced him.

‘You must be drunk, Barrett, to talk in the way you are doing. Be so good as to mind your own concerns.’

‘And isn’t it my concern, and all of our concerns, with murder committed at our very doors?’ retorted the old man with indignation. ‘I’d a deal sooner be dead drunk, I would, and lose my place, than it

had happened; though the poor young master wasn't one to be over-popular.'

'Murder!' echoed De Witt, standing still upon the narrow path.

'Yes, sir, murder, we fear. He wouldn't be likely to fall in, he knew his way about here too well. Besides, they say as the blow on his head must have killed him afore he got in.'

'Good God!' exclaimed De Witt; 'is it Robert Brereton you are speaking of?'

The colour had forsaken his cheek, and he stood for a moment forgetful of the trio all regarding him so earnestly.

'When did they find it out?' he asked presently.

'They was searching for him a good while last night, sir, seeing as he didn't come in to dinner; but they thought maybe he'd gone off to town for the evening

without letting them know—a thing as he'd done once or twice before, so they wasn't particular anxious about it. But this morning there was—traces of a struggle found, and blood about; so then we gets the men up to drag the pond here hard by, and there they found the body. Poor young man, 'tis a sad end to come to at his time of life, and a foul trick of whoever played it on him.'

'Good heavens!' repeated De Witt vaguely, still standing motionless.

His brain felt in a whirl. Who could have done this thing? Who had been hanging about with the purpose of committing this crime? Was it the deed of some mere robber, some common ruffian?

'Were his watch and money stolen?' he asked.

'No, sir, not a thing touched. Whoever

killed him did it for rage and not for robbery.'

One more question De Witt asked :

'Do they know of it up at the Cedars?'

'Why, of course they do, sir. They took the body up there, in course, at once; and they do say as both Mr. and Mrs. Brereton is like off their heads with horror.'

Barrett's manner had gradually thawed as he continued speaking, and he had now become almost friendly and confidential.

De Witt's mind, however, was too much absorbed in revolving the awful facts just laid before him to notice any such details; and he now began to pace again towards the house more quickly than before. He would surely be able to make himself of use to its inmates in some way in this time of trouble, confusion, and dismay?

In a few more minutes he was ascending

the flight of stone steps that led up to the Cedars.

It was some little time before the door opened in answer to his ring, and the butler who admitted him wore a startled look upon his face. The day was dark and chilly outside, but within there was the deeper gloom of lowered blinds and closed windows.

‘Tell Mr. Brereton that I am here,’ said De Witt, as he made his way past the man into the empty drawing-room.

He was not on terms of sufficient intimacy to go uninvited into the library, whence he could hear the murmur of men’s conversation, and where he supposed his host to be. Before, however, he could reach the drawing-room door, a querulous and excited voice broke upon his ear.

‘See him?—of course I won’t see him!

How dare he ask it? Can anything transcend that?’

There was a moment’s pause, whilst the softer murmur of the other voices for a moment intervened; and then the same tones broke forth again, more passionately and excitedly than before.

‘The consummate villain! To dare to come up here and brave it out! But he has walked into the trap now. He sha’n’t go out again. Go, Stewart—go to him—don’t let him out of your sight till it’s done!’

By this time De Witt was in the drawing-room; but the door being open, and only the width of the hall between the two rooms, it was difficult to avoid over-hearing Mr. Brereton’s raised tones.

Was it possible that the latter was speaking of himself? Had his brain really

become affected by the terrible events of the last few hours, and had he—perhaps hearing by some means of the angry encounter with Robert last night—confused himself to the extent of imagining him in some way responsible for the later tragedy?

Whilst meditating on this point, a shadow suddenly fell across the doorway, and Mrs. Brereton, pale and red-eyed, stood before him. She had not apparently, however, been aware of his presence in the house; for, as he advanced towards her, she retreated with a smothered exclamation of terror.

‘Oh!’ she cried in trembling tones, ‘why do you come here? What could induce you to come here?’

‘I came, Mrs. Brereton, in the hope of being of use to you all in your trouble.’

She approached a little nearer to him, trying in vain to subdue her sobs.

‘I don’t believe it!’ she exclaimed wildly; ‘I cannot believe it! If it was so, it was an accident. Oh, say it was an accident!’

But before she had finished speaking, her husband’s voice could be heard calling to her across the hall, angrily, peremptorily; and at the same moment, Colonel Stewart, an old and intimate friend of the family, left the library and crossed over to the drawing-room.

‘Mrs. Brereton,’ he said, ‘your husband begs that you will come to him at once.’

And without noticing Barrington, he took her arm, and courteously but firmly led her out of the room. In another moment, however, he returned, and stood before De Witt in silence.

The latter knew him fairly well. He had

met him out at dinner several times, several times in the hunting field, and had once gone over to his place for a day's shooting with the Breretons, father and son. He knew him to be an honourable, influential, and gentlemanly man, and was glad that the support of his presence and advice had been so quickly offered to the confused and terrified inmates of the Cedars.

But his astonishment was great when, on offering to shake hands, the old Colonel put his hand resolutely behind his back.

‘What is the meaning of that, sir?’ asked De Witt quietly, although the red colour rose into his sunburnt cheek.

‘It means, Captain De Witt,’ replied the old man with dignity, ‘that I refuse to shake hands with a gentleman about to be arrested for murder, and until he can prove that he is innocent of the crime.’

‘Murder?—I arrested?’ stammered Barrington, too much amazed to collect his thoughts. ‘What can you mean, Colonel Stewart?’

‘I mean what I say, Captain De Witt. I mean that my friend’s son was most brutally and foully murdered last night; and that, believing you to have been the last person he met with in the wood where the crime took place, I have felt it my duty to concur with Mr. Brereton in signing a warrant for your immediate apprehension.’

‘You believe me guilty of his death?’

‘My beliefs matter little. You are proved to have been upon the spot about the time it occurred. It will be your place to clear yourself when the moment arrives.’

‘I have no wish to clear myself before you, Colonel Stewart. You are welcome to your foul suspicions. And Mr. Brereton—

does he too believe that I have murdered his son ?’

‘He believes that there is ground for an arrest, Captain De Witt.’

Barrington drew himself more fully up, and folded his arms. All the natural bright insouciance had faded suddenly from his face, and his features had assumed a hard and contemptuous look. His mind was clear enough now ; and he smiled with a bitter sarcasm as he gazed into his companion’s countenance.

‘And when are you going to arrest me, Colonel Stewart ?’ he asked. ‘Am I to wait here for the constables ?’

‘You could not escape if you wished, Captain De Witt. There are two detectives in the library now. But, as a soldier and a gentleman, I give you credit for preferring to face so serious a charge rather than

to make your escape with a dishonoured name.'

'I thank you for the good opinion you hold, sir, of one you own to believing a murderer.'

'God knows, Captain De Witt, none would rejoice more than I could you establish your innocence.'

A pause had ensued, when the door was pushed softly open, and a woman glided in. Her beautiful features were without a trace of colour, and the large eyes gleamed with a weird and unnatural brilliancy. At sight of her the hard smile died out upon De Witt's lips, and his face flushed vividly. But without glancing towards him, she went up to his companion.

'Colonel Stewart,' she said, 'would you tell those men to wait a minute outside? They are at the door now. You know,' she

added, raising her eyes to his, and speaking in measured, self-controlled tones, 'that he would not wish to go away, nor should I wish it. But I must speak to him.'

Colonel Stewart paused for a moment, glancing first at one, then at the other. Then he rose without replying, and went towards the door. The next moment he had passed out, and they could hear his voice addressing the men outside. By that time Nell had moved to her lover's side.

'Put your arms round me, Barrington,' she whispered. 'Closer—closer!'

'May I,' he asked, sadly,—'may I kiss you, my Nell?'

'May you! But it's only good-bye for a few days, is it?' And as she lifted her white face, with a trembling smile upon her lips, meant to cheer and console him, his self-control almost deserted him.

‘Only a few days, I hope, my queen ; perhaps less. You must keep up your spirits. I shall easily be able to set matters all right so soon as I get the chance.’

‘Of course. They are mad, Barrington—papa is quite mad. You must forgive him—’

‘My darling, I don’t mind anything so long as you are so sweet to me. Let other people, if they like, think me a villain—’

‘But nobody will think any the worse of you when you have explained it, will they, Barrington ? And you will be able to do that quite easily ?’

‘Very easily, of course, darling. The real man may have turned up by then. It is just one of those unpleasant accidents which will occur now and then.’

‘And which seem nothing when looked back upon, although so dreadful at the time ?’

‘Just so. I’m not afraid of facing anybody, Nell.’

‘No more am I, Barrington. Nobody *could* believe you guilty—of an awful crime—if they had not lost their senses.’

‘That’s right, my queen. If I can think you are keeping up your courage, nothing else will come too hard upon me. You are a brave and noble girl, and you will have enough to do in helping those around you just now.’

‘Captain De Witt,’ said the Colonel, re-entering, ‘I fear it is my duty to cut short this interview. Miss Lingwood, pray leave us—it is a painful scene for you.’

‘The pain should be on your side, not ours,’ replied the girl, fire flashing from her eyes, and a sudden change in her tones that startled De Witt.

‘Do *you* wish me to go?’ she asked gently, turning towards the latter.

‘I think it would be best so, Nell.’

‘The cab’s waiting, sir,’ said one of the men civilly, entering with his companion and approaching De Witt.

‘Good-bye, my queen,’ said Barrington softly, holding out his hand. ‘Poor Waif,’ he added suddenly,—‘he is alone at the inn—and my letters—’

‘I will fetch them,’ she said. ‘Waif shall stay with me till—you return.’

His hand was in hers as she spoke.

‘Come, sir,’ said the Colonel, anxious perhaps to shorten the interview.

Was it the peremptory tone of his voice that roused the girl’s spirit, always proud and defiant?

Before Barrington was aware of her purpose, she had suddenly bent down and

pressed her lips to his hand. The next moment, with a smile on her face for him, and a haughty bow to Colonel Stewart, Nell Lingwood passed out of the room and went up-stairs.

Meanwhile Barrington, escorted on either side by the two constables, walked through the lofty hall to the front door, and down the flight of steps, his figure severely upright, his face calm to the many curious eyes that watched him through half-opened doors.

And so, as an arrested felon, Nell's lover left the house of his betrothed.

While she—what did she do? Shut herself up in a vain despair and anger? By no means. The first shock of his apprehension over, she went about her work busily, silently, untiringly, soothing a hysterical mother, giving orders to the

disorganized servants, not refusing even to assist the trembling, half-distracted man who sat alone in his library moaning aloud,—but all with tightly closed lips, with a fixed look in the dark eyes, and an unnatural calm that spoke of earnest self-repression and of a hardly concealed suffering.

To herself, no doubt, her trouble appeared as great as that of even the bereaved father ; but this did not prevent her feeling a deep and involuntary compassion for the latter. Foolishly, wickedly, and cruelly as, in her eyes, he had behaved, still he had lost his only son—a young man perhaps almost in every respect worthless and unattractive, yet dear to him—and the loss had made of him a bowed and aged man. Robert had been loved by him, if by no one else ; and the shock of his death to a nature given to but few affections was for the

time a very crushing one. Who could help pitying him, while yet that awful thing lay up-stairs—that mangled corpse, a few hours ago living and moving with the elasticity of youth, and calling him by the name of father—now blurred and crushed out of the semblances of humanity?

Not Nell, even amidst her own trouble and indignant fears.

No wonder that all in the house moved about softly, and spoke in awe-struck whispers—no wonder that Mr. Brereton, by no means a great favourite amongst his country neighbours, became for the time being the centre of a general pitiful sympathy, in which few refused to join.

CHAPTER IV.

WAIF'S TREASURE.

‘O mon chien ! Dieu seul sait la distance entre nous ;
Seul il sait quel degré de l’échelle de l’être
Sépare ton instinct de l’âme de ton maître.

LAMARTINE.

NELL LINGWOOD had not achieved her self-control without a struggle.

For a few minutes—when the cab wheels had rolled away and silence once more reigned in the house, when she realized that the man she loved best upon earth was being transported to the county jail an accused felon—for a few minutes it had then seemed to the girl as if her indignation

and agitation would physically choke her. Her cheeks were crimson, her breath was hurried, and she paced up and down her room, clasping and unclasping her hands in a feverish excitement.

Had the world gone mad that a thing like this should happen? Had Colonel Stewart and her stepfather lost their senses, that such a wild notion had ever entered their heads as to suspect him—him, Barrington, of all people—of a deadly and unlikely crime?

For her stepfather there was perhaps some excuse: his brain, never very strong at the best of times, might well be turned, and his naturally weak judgment warped by the shock of his son's death; but for Colonel Stewart, what excuse, what explanation could be offered for his action? Mr. Brereton must have prejudiced him, nay,

blinded him in some extraordinary way, for him to believe such a thing possible. Who could look for one moment at Barrington's open brow, at his clear, straightforward eyes, the gentle *bonhomie* of his lips, and believe him capable of murdering a fellow-creature? How could they ever frame the apology with which they would have to meet him on his return a few days hence? How could words be made to express the shame they ought to feel, the contrition they ought to acknowledge, for the perpetration of so stupid and cruel an insult?

Yet, would he return? Surely, never again to this house! Surely he would never be able—kindly and forgiving as he was—to take again in his a hand that had signed his arrest for murder, or to set foot once more upon the threshold over which he had now passed as an outraged and humiliated man?

Some insults there are almost too deep for human forgetting, some injuries too embittering for human forgiving. Would he then too include her—would he shrink too from her on his return, as from some one connected with his humiliation, as from something reminding him of the one black hour of a happy, self-respecting life? No! a thousand times no! She had no fears on that score. He would be true to her, as she to him. Neither trial nor disgrace would draw his heart from hers. Thank God, she knew that well. And surely would not the humiliation be her stepfather's, Colonel Stewart's, when he returned, a man acknowledged by all to have been unjustly accused, innocent and injured?

But she must not waste her time in mere excitement, in this useless pacing to and fro. Had she not something to do for him?

With trembling hands, and her cheeks still flushed with crimson, she walked to her wardrobe and took down her sealskin jacket and hat. Then she laid her finger upon the electric bell.

‘Kate,’ she said to the maid, ‘please to get ready to come out with me at once.’

‘On foot, miss?’ asked the girl, with a startled look.

‘On foot,’ replied her mistress, apathetically, as she went on with her own preparations.

She was almost dressed when the door opened, and Mrs. Brereton walked in.

‘Oh, Nell, my dear child, where are you going? where *can* you be going, to-day of all days?’

‘I am going down to the village, mother,’ she replied, drawing on her gloves.

‘To the village? Oh, Nell, you must be

mad! Why, it isn't decent—your poor brother lying up-stairs.' And Mrs. Brereton's voice lost itself in sobs.

'You mustn't stop me, mother,' said Nell, with feverish impatience. 'I must go. If it was my own brother that was dead, still I should go.'

'It isn't the time to remember those things now, Nell.'

'What things? Oh, mother, do be coherent. I can't understand you!'

'That he wasn't your real brother, poor fellow!'

'My going out can't alter that.'

'It's a want of respect. If you must go, let me order the carriage. But what do you want? Why can't Kate do it for you?'

Nell stood before her mother with compressed lips.

'I am going to fetch his dog, and his

letters and things. I will go in the carriage if you like, mother, but go I must.'

'Oh, Nell, you can't! Richards shall go, if any one must; he is the proper person. It isn't a fit thing for a young lady to do. My dear, it would be so commented upon—you could not do it. Though, what *any* of us have to do with the matter, I can't see.'

'Do you think I mind comments?' asked Nell with scornful eyes.

'And your papa will never, never hear of having that dog in the house! It is cruel of you to suggest such a thing, Nell, I think—quite cruel!'

'Why cruel?'

'To remind him of all this horror and suffering. The very sound of Captain De Witt's name is almost too much for him—he is nearly wild.'

‘The sound of Captain De Witt’s name will be a subject of remorse to him in a few days—I hope,’ said the girl, slowly and painfully, whilst the crimson deepened in her cheeks. ‘Mamma, I will ring and order the carriage to please you, but do not say any more.’

‘He will never bear that dog in the house, Nell—I know he won’t!’

‘Then I will leave it too.’

‘My dear, how can you? You are not yet independent. Oh, Nell, don’t be so self-willed!’ And Mrs. Brereton burst out sobbing. ‘How am I to manage between you both, I can’t think! And I have trouble enough to bear on my own account, I am sure. Sometimes I wish I had never been born!’

With a strong effort Nell controlled her impatience. She knelt down beside her

mother, and held her hand for a moment, stroking it kindly ; then she got the bottle of eau de Cologne, and bathed her forehead, and finally held a spoonful of sal volatile and water to her lips.

All these attentions had the effect of soothing the elder woman, whose sobs died away by degrees, and who presently rose at her daughter's suggestion, and permitted herself to be conducted to her boudoir, where Nell poked up the fire, drew out the sofa, and tucked her comfortably beneath the coverlet.

Then bending down and kissing her affectionately, with a whispered injunction not to get up until she returned, Nell left the room softly, and hearing that the carriage was already at the door, called her maid and descended the stairs. For the girl never dreamt of giving up her own

way ; nor indeed had Mrs. Brereton expected it of her.

That was not the fashion in which these two managed matters. The mother complained, and the daughter soothed ; the elder woman ordered and wept, and the younger one disobeyed and kissed. It was not perhaps the most exemplary conduct on the part of the latter ; but so it was, and so it had always been. The elder woman was of a weakly nature, the younger one of strong feelings and a determined will ; and they had fallen naturally into positions the reverse perhaps of those intended by nature.

It had been somewhat of a misfortune to Nell Lingwood, that, amongst those who had surrounded her from childhood, not one had, by the strength of his or her character, been able to command her obedience ; and she had hence become somewhat too much

inclined to rely upon her own opinion and to act upon her own judgment. She was not by nature stubborn, or even headstrong, but she was a keen reader of character, and a stern and uncompromising critic; and had long ago made up her mind that to none of those around her at the Cedars could she pay the tribute of that respect which is the parent of a willing submission. To her mother, weak, loving, and impressionable, she gave full allowance of a love which was called upon rather to support than to lean; whilst the narrow-minded obstinacy of her step-father had long ceased to rouse in her any other sentiment than one of passive resistance and of a cool indifference.

When at length the carriage stopped before the door of the little inn a sudden nervousness assailed her; and hastily

pulling down her veil, she bid Kate dismount before her. The landlord was already at the door, and Nell paused a moment as she stood before him. Then she spoke out clearly, and a little haughtily.

‘I am come for Captain De Witt’s dog,’ she said, her head raised. ‘Will you show us to his room?’

The landlord bowed silently and beckoned to the waiter. Ill news travels fast, and he had, of course, in company with all the country-side, already learnt the details of the arrest of Miss Lingwood’s *fiancé*; but he was a man of tact, and perhaps also of feeling.

‘William,’ he said, ‘show this lady and her maid up-stairs at once.’

The waiter, however, was not of so reticent a nature as his master; and his foot was scarcely upon the stairs before he

began recounting to them many interesting facts.

‘I’ve fed the dawg, ma’am,’ he said cheerfully. ‘I looked to it ’e ’ad his good dinner, same as usual, but no power on earth won’t persuade ’im to leave that there room; and I thought he might as well stop on a bit, till we see if nobody came to fetch him. ’E’s a good dawg, ’e is, a capital trust dawg; won’t notice no one’s orders but ’is master’s.’

So saying, he flung open a bed-room door. The sight within suddenly brought a mist before the girl’s eyes and a lump into her throat.

‘Waif,’ she cried softly, ‘Waif!’

In the centre of the room sat the colley, his bushy fore-paws spread over an old shooting-coat of De Witt’s. At the sound of her voice he half rose and looked round

eagerly ; but on perceiving that his master was not there, lay down again with a disappointed air.

She came up to him and laid a loving hand upon his head ; and slowly wagging his tail, he thrust a soft nose up her sleeve.

She bent down to kiss the yellow head, and a warm tear dropped unseen among his curls. ‘Waif,’ she repeated, ‘come to me !’ And as she went towards the window, he followed her half unwillingly, keeping, however, a steady eye fixed upon the shooting-coat.

‘The Captain’s things is all in his portmanteau, ma’am,’ volunteered the little waiter ; ‘I put the rest of ’em in just now—all except that there coat, which I couldn’t get away from the dawg. The key you’ll see is in the lock, ma’am. I think when the

Captain returns, he'll find all his things is right.'

Nell felt that she must force herself to say something.

'I have no doubt of it,' she said, as she slipped a coin into the man's hand; and putting the key of the portmanteau into her pocket, moved towards the door. 'I think you had better keep it until—he returns. It won't be—many days.'

'Of course not, miss,' said William, in polite acquiescence; and Nell felt cognizant of the chivalry and good taste of her humble companion in thus avoiding any more direct reference to his knowledge of the true state of affairs.

She never thought of him as being, a few days hence, at the magistrate's inquiry, one of the most important of those whose witness was to damn her lover's cause.

‘Waif!’ she called once again, and more imperatively than before. ‘Waif! you are to come with me!’

The dog cast one doubtful glance towards the old coat; then he turned quietly, and followed her down the narrow stairs. He fully recognized the authority of De Witt’s queen. No doubt she had been deputed to bring him to his master; at any rate, she was not one to tempt him from his duty to that master without wise and adequate cause. So he followed the two into the close carriage with a thoughtful dignity of mien, implying the expectation of an explanation presently; and once there, curled himself up at the bottom of it without fuss, striving, like the gentlemanly canine he always was, to occupy as little room and to be as little in the way as possible.

CHAPTER V.

STRUCK BY THE BOLT.

‘ Honour and shame from no condition rise ;
Act well your part,—there all the honour lies.’

POPE.

THREE days later De Witt was brought before the magistrates. Four sat on the Bench on the occasion, and out of these, three (including Colonel Stewart) were more or less personally acquainted with the arrested man. Nevertheless, all concurred in the opinion that he must be committed for trial. De Witt, on his part, after hearing the evidence, would have been astonished had they acted otherwise. The girl Lucy Barrett had, it seemed, on

being questioned by her father as to the cause of her agitation on the night of the murder, given a half-coherent account of some quarrel between the two young gentlemen.

On hearing the next morning of Robert's disappearance, this account naturally recurred to Barrett's mind, and led him instinctively towards the spot where he supposed the two to have met. Here he at once noticed the signs of a struggle or a fall—grass crushed, ferns torn away. His suspicions so far excited, set him reflecting and exploring more closely; and presently he discovered, half hidden among the bracken, and not far from the scene of the struggle, a walking-stick dropped or thrown away, the heavy end of which, he perceived to his horror, was clotted with blood. This stick he at once took up to the Cedars,

justly thinking that it might afford some clue to the disappearance of the unhappy young man. There his story excited, as was natural, the greatest confusion and dismay—a confusion and dismay intensified by the positive declaration of the footman, that the walking-stick belonged to Captain De Witt.

At this juncture Colonel Stewart's assistance was obtained, and by his advice the police were brought over and the pond dragged, when the body of Robert was found—death, however, being apparently the result not of drowning, but of a crushing blow previously dealt upon the victim's head. There was little doubt but that the assailant, whoever he might be, had merely as an afterthought, and in order to conceal his crime, flung the corpse of the murdered man into the pond hard by. Indeed, the

condition of the ground seemed to indicate plainly enough to the police, when, led by the gamekeeper, they went to inspect it, the spot where the body had fallen, and where subsequently it had been dragged inanimate over the herbage towards the water.

There could be no doubt but that the evidence, as it stood at present, pointed towards De Witt as the possible murderer. The fact that revenge and not cupidity appeared to have been the motive of the crime (since the dead man's watch and money were found intact upon his person, although the former had been broken in the fall, or previous struggle), narrowed the limits of conjecture to the general mind; added to which, the hands of the watch had been stopped at a quarter to seven, about ten minutes after Lucy's entrance,

so her father stated, and when he supposed De Witt to be still upon the spot.

The only other person suggested as supposed to entertain any grudge against the murdered man—viz. young Barrett, between whom and himself a few angry words were reported to have passed once or twice—was known to have been out of the way at the time, having been sent off some few weeks previously to another of Mr. Brereton's properties. This was a small moor lying some half-hour's distance by rail, the other side of Tentbury—the manufacturing town five miles north of Cotswold Moors.

After him, on the suggestion of the prisoner's lawyer, the police had made inquiries, when it was proved that he had never left the place, but was at his work the morning after the murder, as he had been the whole of the day before. But, indeed,

his animosity to Robert Brereton seemed unsuspected by any except De Witt himself.

Old Barrett was an honest-minded man, but it was but natural that he should endeavour to make the best of his son's disposition.

‘Jim,’ he said, ‘was a bit churlish and sour-spoken to everybody. He was a good sort of lad, but that was his way ; and if he'd spoken once or twice a trifle uncivil to the poor young master—why, that was the way he spoke to every one. He never could control his tongue ; but as to any real ill-feeling, he'd answer for it that was all gammon, and Jim would be as grieved as any of them for the trouble of it all, and the wickedness.’

And Lucy, who might perhaps have thrown some light upon the subject, now showed an obstinate determination to seal

her lips in silence. Since the date of the murder she had enwrapped herself in a strange and sullen apathy, which might either be the effect, as the neighbours suggested, of so violent a shock upon a young girl's nerves, or of some deeper and less easily read sentiment. At any rate, she either could not or would not do anything to add force to the prisoner's weak defence.

Another point there was, moreover, which told forcibly against the accused man. This was the testimony, given half reluctantly by the brisk little waiter at the village inn, as to the unusual condition and conduct of De Witt on the night of the murder—his evident desire to escape observation, his silence and abstraction, his want of appetite, and admission that something out of the way had happened, joined

to the scratches on his face and neck, and the blood spots upon the wristbands of his shirt. The evidence was concluded by the elder Barrett, who bore witness to the fact that he had (shortly after the discovery of the body in the pond) found—wandering apparently without special purpose in the neighbourhood—the accused, who, when addressed, showed a palpable hesitation and desire to avoid interrogation.

De Witt—for the most part a silent listener to all this—felt startled to perceive the network of suspicious circumstances and the neat chain of evidence within which an unlucky fate had enclosed him. Yet he would not admit, even to himself, a moment's doubt of the ultimate issue of trial before an intelligent and impartial jury, and with competent counsel to elucidate the truth.

It was a sharp and unexpected blow, this arraignment for the committal of a foul and loathsome deed of violence—this having to stand before the bar of his country—he a soldier and a gentleman—accused of the taint of blood; but he would not flinch before it. A soldier must face his fate as he would face the enemy's front; a gentleman must stand upright in his innocence, firm in his own self-respect, however thick the moral mud flung by ignorant hands to soil the whiteness of his name.

It was only for a time. The ordeal would soon be over, and his good repute re-established among men; and, although in his innermost heart he knew and recognized the fact, that the fire could scarcely pass over and leave him unscathed, yet it was only cowards who called attention to the scars of life, or displayed to others the depth

of the slow-healing cicatrice that an evil fortune had inflicted on them.

One thought indeed there was which sent the blood more quickly from his cheek, and brought a keener pang to his mind. Could he, might he—the trial over, and he an acquitted man—return once more to the girl he loved, and ask her to be his bride? Could he support the knowledge that the outside world, even if convinced of his innocence, might possibly blame him and pity her in their union? Might there not possibly all his life long be some few who, through ignorance of the truth, or in order to pay off some private grudge, might point the finger of scorn against him as a man once put upon his trial for murder, and against her as the wife of such a man?

Was it not henceforth and for all the years of his life in the power of every human

creature, however low, however degraded, to taunt him with the memory of these dark days, to remind him how he had once been held worthy of the cruelest suspicions of his fellow-men, been judged amenable to the most violent passions, capable of the blackest of deeds—nay, had stood in the felon's dock, to hear himself publicly accused of a capital crime?

Could he ever go into society again?—still less, could he ever bear to take her with him? Where might she not perhaps overhear some unconscious word, intercept perhaps some cruel look, calculated to stab her tender, loyal heart to its very core? His blood rose, his pride swelled, and he set his lips together with a sudden gesture of passion.

‘Convicted or acquitted, it will be the same,’ he said to himself; ‘I will never

marry her! No one shall say of me that I have dragged a woman down, least of all shall they say it of her, my queen!’

And then, in the lonely prison cell, his head fell upon his hands, and there was a long still silence.

For the most part, however, Barrington’s time was fully occupied. He had a good deal of correspondence to receive and reply to; and, in addition to the almost daily visits of his solicitor,—a bright, quick-eyed little man, who took a cheerful view of things, and declared himself certain of a favourable verdict,—had many other visitors, notably Sir Simon De Witt, who journeyed up from Rolston at once on hearing of the committal to see his young cousin.

Nothing could exceed the simple-hearted kindness of Sir Simon, or his dismay at such an unexpected catastrophe. His affec-

tionate sympathy almost upset the younger man ; whilst his indignation spurred him to the lengths of a personal call upon both Mr. Brereton and Colonel Stuart,—to the latter of whom he was a complete stranger,—to expostulate with them upon their inhuman and unparalleled conduct in the arrest of, and still more, their subsequent refusal of bail to, his cousin. Here mingled sorrow and indignation so utterly confused the words and addled the brain of the usually quiet, studious man, that he succeeded in making nothing clear to either of the two, except the fact that their visitor had come thus far with the express purpose of insulting them ; and the interviews, merging speedily into a hot altercation, concluded in both cases with the request—querulous on the part of Mr. Brereton, choleric on the part of the old

Indian—that Sir Simon would betake himself and his grievance, as soon as might be, elsewhere.

After which encounters the poor baronet returned homewards, to suffer from a week's liver attack, the result of worry and over-excitement, and to walk up and down his library ceaselessly, too sore and heartsick to take any comfort in the many old and valued friends that adorned the shelves on its walls. At the end of which time, however, he was again in Tentbury, fussing round the prison doors, and making the life of every magistrate and legal man about the place a burden to him.

CHAPTER VI.

WAITING FOR TRIAL.

‘ Oh, fear not in a world like this,
And thou shalt know ere long,—
Know how sublime a thing it is
To suffer and be strong.’—LONGFELLOW.

THE next three days, with their load of dull suspense, of cruel anxiety, and of sad monotony, seemed to Nell Lingwood almost endless. Each evening, when at length the clock struck ten, and she could make an excuse for retiring, it seemed to her as if she were months older, and more careworn than when she had risen in the morning ; and more than once she placed her watch against her ear, after glancing at it, to make sure

that it had not stopped, so extraordinarily slowly did the hours appear to move on.

Her only comfort during these dreary days was Waif, who kept much beside her, and whom she imagined, perhaps correctly, to share in some degree her feelings of suspense and of anxiety regarding his master. She liked to feel that something so intimately connected with Barrington was in her possession, that an animal he valued so highly was her companion. It was nice to feel that she held this link between them both.

It was not that she doubted De Witt's constancy, still less his tender love; but many miserable circumstances intervened between them, and who could say what fruit these circumstances might bear in the way of wounded pride or of an exaggerated sense of honour or chivalry?

And—and Waif was, after all, only a dog, and not so dear to him as she was—and yet—yet he must return to claim Waif, he must at any rate write to her regarding Waif? Nell knew not of what she was afraid; yet she knew she had fears as to what course her lover might feel it incumbent upon him to pursue on his return from the magistrates' inquiry—as of course he would return.

And then, the three days over, came the funeral—a sad and dreary funeral, at which there were but few mourners, and during which the snow fell heavily and darkly, whilst Nell sat at home nursing her mother, who was alternately weeping, and exhausted with a hysterical fit—not so much now for the loss of the step-son with whom in life she had never agreed, as for the condition of her husband, who had persisted, against

the advice of his medical man in attending the ceremony, and who was in such a nervous and trembling condition that he had had to be assisted into the carriage by the butler.

‘It will kill him, Nell—it will be his death!’ she sobbed again and again; ‘one funeral always brings another. He is quite unfit to leave his room, quite unfit to go out, even if it were not so terribly agitating a thing as this; but he never will listen to anything I say. I implored him not to go. And what good can it do poor Robert now? But I do think it was cruel of those Longmore Breretons not to have come over, the only near relations poor Robert had. Just to make an excuse of the severity of the weather, when they are neither of them old or infirm! But that is the way with everybody—nobody feels for one when one is in

trouble. I shall never be the same woman again, Nell—never. I shall never get over the shock, nor, I am sure, will your papa, even if going out in this weather does not kill him. I shall never be able to go to sleep again without thinking of it. It seems too horrible, that one's own step-son should be murdered! It may be you next, Nell, or my poor husband—who can tell?’

‘Such a thing would be very unlikely,’ said the girl, a little wearily, fanning her mother's brow. ‘Mamma, you must try to fight against these morbid terrors, or you will never get over the shock. Try not to think of it—I mean, try not to ponder over the details. It is so bad for you; and where is the use of it?’

‘Oh, Nell, I can't help it; my mind will go back to it again and again. The moment you leave me, and I am alone, I begin it all

over again, till I feel as if I should go off my head.'

'Then I will stay by you, mamma, and read aloud to you.'

'I am always thinking, "who can it have been who did it?"'

'Who indeed!' repeated Nell wistfully. 'Ah, don't you think, mamma, *I* would give all I possess to have that question answered?'

'Oh, my dear, it must be so terrible for you! Indeed I feel for you. What will you do, my poor child, if they say he is guilty?' And Mrs. Brereton shuddered violently.

Nell lifted her head proudly, whilst a sudden blaze of colour came into her pale cheeks, and a sparkle into the heavy eyes.

'I shall love him more dearly than I have ever done before! The more he is

insulted and persecuted, the nearer he will come to me, and the more closely shall I cling to him.'

'But—but—oh, my dear, suppose he has really done it?'

Her daughter rose up with flashing eyes.

'Never say that—never imply that again before me, mamma! I cannot bear it. Do you wish me to hate you?'

'You care more for him than for me, I do believe, Nell!'

'Do not ask me that, mamma. But, except for you, there is no one else upon earth perhaps that I truly love. And I could not love even you if you can believe that—what they say of him. Say you do not mean it, mother!'

'I don't, Nell; you know I don't in my heart. But it is so puzzling, and I don't know what to think. It must have been

some one who bore ill-will against poor dear Robert, every one says.'

'And was Barrington the sort to bear ill-will against any one—ill-will of a revengeful sort? You know better, mother.'

'Oh, my dear, I know nothing. I only know how miserable I am, and how hard a thing is life just now. Your papa is angry with me because I will not be convinced that Captain De Witt was the man; and you are ready to hate me because I will not swear he is innocent!' And Mrs. Brereton burst forth into a fresh paroxysm of weeping.

The next day was the day of the magistrates' meeting and of De Witt's committal; and lunch was hardly over before the news arrived at the Cedars, in the form of a communication from Colonel Stewart to Mr. Brereton.

The latter had not that day attended upon the Bench ; he had indeed at first, in his nervous excitement, contemplated taking this injudicious step, but had finally permitted himself to be persuaded of the almost unseemliness of so doing, to the great relief of his brother magistrates, who one and all felt that they could follow the case far better if unembarrassed by the agitated presence of the father of the murdered man. The knowledge of the verdict had a curious effect upon him.

He was still sitting over the lunch table, his wife and step-daughter being gone, when the note was handed to him. The perusal of it brought the colour to his cheek and a clearer look into his eye. He hastily swallowed a glass of wine ; then rising, drew himself up, and went to his wife's boudoir up-stairs. Mrs. Brereton

looked up with astonished eyes at his entrance. His step was firmer, his figure more upright than they had been since the shock of his son's death; and as he spoke, and told her of the news, his voice for the first time had regained its steadiness. There was even a triumphant ring about it. Perhaps he felt the reviving influence of this new absorbing interest; life had again become interesting; here was a counter-excitement, a stimulant to rouse him from his apathy—the hope of conviction and punishment for his son's murderer.

‘Horatia,’ he said, almost with dignity, when he had finished reading aloud the Colonel's letter, to which Mrs. Brereton listened in a breathless and appalled silence, ‘I must speak to Eleanor at once. She must be told at once that any further communication with this—this man is

absolutely impossible—that she must at once and for ever banish the very remembrance of him from her mind as a shame and an abhorrence. Doubtless, perverse as she has been, she will herself see it now in this light. She cannot well do otherwise. But it must be an understood thing; I must have her promise.’

‘Oh, my dear, I fear she will never give him up.’

‘Never give him up! What!—a murderer! a villain not fit to walk the earth! a man who murdered her own step-brother! Are you mad, Horatia?’

‘Oh dear, oh dear, she will never believe he is guilty!’

‘Will she be convinced, think you, when he is convicted by judge and jury?—when he is sentenced to the gallows?’

‘Oh, Edward!’ and Mrs. Brereton lifted

a terrified face to his, 'you do not think *that* will happen, do you?'

'Why should it not happen, if there is any justice to be found amongst men? Do you wish the villain to escape the gallows? I don't. I pray heaven he may get his deserts!'

'It would be too awful! A gentleman who has dined at one's own table, and been one of us. Oh, Edward, I could never get over it! Do you really think him guilty?'

'Of course I do—the foul wretch!'

'What will our poor Nell do? How will she bear the shame of it all? It will kill her, Edward.'

'It will teach her a useful lesson. If you had listened to me, both of you, earlier on, none of this would have happened. My poor boy might have been living still. I told you from the first he was an ad-

venturer; but I little thought then he was going to turn out a murderer. It is of no use crying, Horatia; we can't undo the past. I am a broken-down man; it is too late to alter matters now. And do not upset me needlessly by these constant tears. Ring the bell instead, and send for Nell.'

'I will go and fetch her myself, my dear. Perhaps it will be best if I break the shock to her first as gently as I can.'

'As you like. I will wait here. Don't be longer than you can help.'

Mrs. Brereton was not many minutes before she returned with her daughter. Nell had received the news with a proud stoicism that had almost deceived her mother into a belief that the shock was less terrible than she had anticipated. The moment the elder woman put her white

face in at the girl's bed-room door, and before she could frame her trembling lips to utter the words, Nell turned towards her, and said steadily, almost coldly,

‘You needn't say it, mamma. I know what you want to tell me. They have committed him for trial.’

Mrs. Brereton advanced into the room, a trembling, pitiful woman.

‘Oh, my dear!’ she exclaimed, putting her arm round her daughter, ‘it is so dreadful for you!’

But Nell drew away a little, and disengaged herself from the caressing hand.

‘Don't pity *me!*’ she said quietly, but with a concentrated bitterness. ‘Pity the poor misguided fools who have done this thing.’

‘And your papa, my dear—your papa wishes to speak to you. But I don't think

you can bear it—I will tell him you are not fit for it.’

‘I am fit for anything; I can bear anything,’ replied the girl. Then she added, half to herself, with a slow self-contempt, and a keen anticipation of future pain, ‘I shall have more to bear before it is all over; what does it matter what *I* have to bear?’

And laying her hand for one moment upon the head of Waif, who stood beside her,—as if by the touch to inspire herself with fresh strength,—she followed her mother out of the room.

‘Eleanor,’ said her step-father solemnly, as she entered the boudoir, ‘you probably guess the nature of what I have to say to you?’

She shook her head silently.

‘You have heard your mother’s communication?’

‘I have.’

‘Sit down, my dear; don’t stand. You look ill and upset, as we all are.’

‘I would rather stand, thank you, papa.’

‘It is a horrible business, Nell—almost too horrible to speak of. I am sure I need only say a word. You have a heart, I am sure, Nell—your poor brother—you care—’

‘Papa, why should you agitate yourself by recurring to it? You know I care.’

‘I know it, Nell. You are at times independent and self-willed, but you would not willingly—break the hearts of your mother and myself, or—insult the dead.’

Nell stood silent, her face expressionless, her pose statuesque; and her step-father resumed, with a visible shade of irritation upon his features,—

‘You understand me, Nell? You must

surely follow me? You will have nothing more to do with that man—in thought or deed?’

The face into which he looked so querulously, so irritably, grew white and set.

‘I will never throw over Barrington De Witt, if that is what you mean.’

‘Good God! to say it to my face! Why, the very mention of the man’s name in this house is an insult to all within it, an insult to morality itself! Would you cling to a murderer, child?’

‘Barrington is no murderer,’ said the set lips slowly.

‘Would you cling to a condemned criminal?’

‘I would cling to an innocent man all the more if he were convicted,’ said Nell.

‘But that,’ she continued, raising her head

proudly, 'he will never be. There is a God in heaven, and justice upon earth still—though not in this house.'

'You rave!' exclaimed Mr. Brereton, passionately. 'How dare you say such things? Who are you to set your opinion against the legal judges of the land? You are a mad, wicked girl!'

A strange smile came over the white face before him.

'I am not mad—yet,' she said slowly. 'Perhaps—they may drive me so before—the end.'

'Promise me to give his presents up to your mother, to burn his letters! Promise me to hold no further communication with him—to banish out his very memory. Don't you know—are you too mad, too infatuated to see that the past is a disgrace to you?—that years cannot wipe out the humiliation

of having your name associated with such a man ?’

‘Years shall not wipe out my love for him. There is no shame. His affection is my glory, whatever happens.’

She paused, and her lip quivered.

Mr. Brereton was blind with fury. True to his nature, he showed no mercy, he felt no pity for one who roused his wrath.

‘And will you still,’ he asked, his eyes fixed upon hers, ‘feel proud of his affection, still glory in his love when he mounts the gallows, to die the death of the felon ?’

He had gone too far ; and his wife started forward with a smothered cry.

‘Oh, Edward, you will kill her !’

The slight figure swayed for a moment, then fell heavily forwards, as she caught it in her arms.

‘Oh, Edward !’ repeated Mrs. Brereton

reproachfully, as she marked the blanched face and closed eyes, 'how could you be so cruel !'

'Go on, go on !' said her husband, as he assisted her to lay her daughter upon a sofa ; 'that's just like you women ! You always agree to a thing, and then blame one if it goes wrong. How could I help the girl fainting ?'

'Of course you could !' replied his wife, motherly compassion inspiring her with unaccustomed courage. 'I had no objection to your saying what had to be said, but you need not have said it with that butcher-like cruelty !'

'Oh, very well !' said Mr. Brereton ; 'have it your own way ! Spoil your daughter as much as you like. You'll rue it some day. But of course I'm always in the wrong.'

And perceiving that Nell was already re-opening her eyes, and that a faint shade of colour was returning to the pallid cheeks, he very wisely retired from the field of battle, confessing himself for the moment outnumbered.

Meanwhile the girl rose to a sitting posture, and seeing her mother's anxious and commiserating gaze, essayed a feeble smile. In truth, Mrs. Brereton was a good deal frightened, for Nell was not of a constitution prone to faintness, and the present incident was an unprecedented one.

‘Lie still, my dear child, my poor dear—lie still,’ she said tenderly, pushing her daughter gently down upon the cushions. But Nell soon rose again.

‘I am all right now, mamma,’ she said; ‘don’t look so terrified. I can’t think what made me so foolish.’

‘It wasn’t foolish at all. I’m sure I don’t wonder at it the least,’ replied her mother, still full of her feminine indignation against Mr. Brereton’s want of tact and kindness. ‘It was enough to make any one faint. I could not have believed that your papa could have spoken with so much—brutality. And I told him so.’

Nell drew her hand across her eyes, striving to repress the hysterical shudder which assailed her as the barbarous words recurred to her memory.

‘Never mind, mamma,’ she said as she rose to her feet. ‘Cruel words are of no real account, are they? But don’t let us talk of it. And I will go to my own room again now.’

‘Let me come with you, dear.’

‘Dear mamma, you are very good to me, but I would rather be alone. Oh,’ she

exclaimed, with a sudden choking gasp, ‘I *must* be alone ! I cannot talk !’

‘Promise me at least that you will lie down and rest,’ said the mother.

‘I cannot lie down. I am quite well, mamma—indeed I am, but I long for solitude.’

Silently Mrs. Brereton pressed a tearful kiss upon the girl’s white forehead, and then Nell escaped to her own room.

Once there, she locked the door, and then flung herself upon her knees on the floor beside a chair, her elbows on the seat, her face buried in her hands. There were no tears, no sobs—she did not move or tremble as she knelt on there silently, apathetically, in a sort of trance of misery, of doubt, of horror.

Oh, what was Barrington feeling now ? he, so true a gentleman, so light and gay of

heart, so free of guile, so keenly sensitive to the claims of good name and honour—What was her agony now compared to his?

And clearly before her rose the vision of the bright, bronzed, half-boyish face, dimmed, clouded with a pain too great for words. What had he done that he of all men should be singled out for a visitation so cruel, so unlooked for? Did not the very expression of his countenance, so upright, so simple, so manly and straightforward, bear its own witness to a life purer and better than that of most? How could it be that men, looking upon that silent but unlying witness, could be found blind enough to imagine him capable of crime—of a murderer's heart, of bloody hands?

Her thoughts were too vague to be put into words. She knew not how long she knelt on there alone; she scarcely knew

she herself suffered, so absorbing was the sense of sympathetic suffering for him. Suddenly, however, something touched her softly on the shoulder, and she lifted her head.

Beside her stood Waif, his wistful eyes looking down upon her, his paw lightly placed upon her shoulder. Flinging her arms round him, she sat down upon the floor, and drew the silky head against her own. The flood-gates were opened at length by a dog's caress, and she wept softly and freely.

‘Poor Waif!’ she said, as he pressed willingly up to her, giving her the best of his canine sympathy in her trouble. ‘You and I, Waif, are all alone in the world now ; we are the only people who care for *him*. Every one else is turned against him.’

Then, after a while, relieved by her tears,

she got up, and putting on her jacket, crept softly downstairs with the colley at her heels. But as she neared the front door, the colour suddenly flushed back into her pale cheek, and she laid an instinctive hand upon Waif's collar.

The study door was ajar, and from the room within came Mr. Brereton's irritable accents.

‘There's that wretched dog again! Who let him into the hall? It's a scandal to have him in the house at all. I wish somebody would shoot the brute! I tell you, Horatia, I won't put up with this sort of thing; I mean to be master in my own house!’

Apparently he had not caught sight of his step-daughter, but only of her companion, when Nell presented herself suddenly at the door, her hand still upon Waif's collar.

‘Papa,’ she said, with a new and unaccustomed gentleness, ‘leave me the dog. It is not much to ask ; he shall never cross your sight if I can help it, he shall never trouble you.’ Her lips quivered. ‘I cannot do without him. Let us have some pity on one another!’ And before either her father or her mother could answer her, she had moved away.

The cool outside air fell freshly upon her burning eyes as she descended the steps, and a wintry sun was just setting behind the leafless and gaunt-armed trees in the long avenue, showing lines of crimson between the giant trunks. Here and there a bird twittered faintly as he flew homewards to rest and sleep, and every now and then a little patch of snow fell from the evergreen branches with a soft thud upon the half-frozen ground.

It was a chilly evening, yet sweet and calm and restful; an evening for peaceful thoughts, for a poet's fancies; but to Nell, like each of the four days that had preceded it, the embodiment of an unlovely world, coloured in harmony with a mind of restless misery, a heart full of cruel pain.

Suddenly, as she neared the end of the avenue, she paused and shuddered. Just in front of her was the little stile leading towards the Barretts' cottage, the smoke from which she could see rising straightly upwards in the still clear atmosphere.

This was the first time she had walked here since the terrible event which had turned the current of all their lives, and the cruel mystery of which seemed likely to overshadow all the bright sunlight of her own and Barrington's future. Over the stile Robert had gone that evening,

passing so unsuspectingly to his doom ; and, but a few yards further on, somewhere amid that tangled brake of fern and undergrowth, the murderer had struck him to his death, and had dragged the mangled body towards the pond. Involuntarily she half turned ; then she paused again, and glancing around her with a terrified air, set her lips together with sudden determination and walked onwards.

The first greyness of coming twilight was already beginning to show itself among the trees, and the soft silver mists were gathering around, clothing the stems in ghostly robes. The birds were all gone home, and the only sound about was the crackle of a falling twig or of sliding snow. It was very lonely, very silent, very still ; but her mind once made up, Nell went on firmly, Waif, as if to

encourage her, keeping closely tucked to her side.

Reaching the stile, she passed over it, her eyes fixed straight before her. She could not well have borne to glance aside in the direction of that mysterious and terrible bit of covert which had been the scene of the family tragedy so few days ago. As it was, the realization of the crime seemed to come before her with a more terrible vividness than ever before, and the thoughts that crowded her mind turned her for the moment physically sick. But she continued steadily on her way, only pausing when at length she stood in sight of the door of the gamekeeper's cottage.

In the doorway, looking out, stood a girlish figure, which, on perceiving her approach, turned and fled indoors. But it was too late.

‘Lucy!’ called Miss Lingwood, remaining where she was. ‘Lucy!’ she repeated more imperatively; and the girl advanced slowly. ‘I want to speak to you, Lucy; will you please come here?’

‘Won’t you step inside, miss? There’s no one but me at home.’

‘No, thank you, Lucy. I would rather speak to you here.’ And the young girl, throwing her shawl over her shoulders, came forward unwillingly. Her eyes were fixed upon the ground, and she avoided Miss Lingwood’s gaze—a steady gaze which seemed striving to read the inmost recesses of the other’s heart.

‘Lucy,’ said her companion slowly, but in tones which seemed to the trembling girl before her those of a merciless and clear-sighted judge, ‘did you speak the truth this morning?’

‘I, Miss Nell? In—in court, do you mean?’

‘Of course I mean in court. Did you tell the magistrates all the truth, Lucy? Did you tell them *all* that you knew?’

‘Oh, indeed, miss, I didn’t say a single word as wasn’t true—I didn’t indeed!’

‘I did not ask that, Lucy. I asked you if you told them *all* you knew?’

‘Oh, Miss Nell, I don’t know what you mean. I did my best. It has been an awful time for me,’ and Lucy’s voice broke, and her fingers wound themselves convulsively in and out of her apron.

‘We have all had to suffer, Lucy—perhaps all of us innocently. I don’t accuse you; but remember, you may be answerable in the sight of God for the life of an innocent man. Dare you keep back the truth, Lucy?’

‘No, miss, I won’t—indeed I won’t!’

‘Tell me now—slowly—every word you said this morning, and to which you swore on God’s own book.’

‘Oh, miss, it was all true—Bible truth—every word of it! I only told them, as father bid me, all I knew—that the Captain came up as Mr. Robert was talking a few words to me, and spoke angry-like, and there was words between them as I ran away; but I didn’t rightly hear what either of them said, owing to being a good bit startled and put out myself.’

‘What had startled you, Lucy?’

‘Mr. Robert, miss, coming upon me unexpected like. I didn’t know as he was behind me till he put his hand upon my arm of a sudden.’

‘I have no wish to pry into your secrets, Lucy,—God alone and your own conscience

must bear witness as to whether you are a good girl or not,—but I expect you to answer me this : was not Mr. Robert making love to you when Captain De Witt came up ? ’

Nell’s tone sounded stern and judicial, and the girl’s trembling increased.

‘ Oh, miss, I wouldn’t deceive you. He was a bit foolish in what he said maybe, and startled me. ’

‘ It was not the first time Mr. Robert had made love to you, Lucy, and you had encouraged him ? ’

‘ I didn’t encourage him, miss, so to speak—quite the contrary. But what is a girl to do if a gentleman speaks a civil word to her now and then ? I’m an honest girl, Miss Nell, indeed I am ! ’

‘ I have nothing to do with that, Lucy. But why do you equivocate as you are

doing? I tell you, Lucy, you will be made to speak out at the trial, and to tell all you know. You might be allowed to tell half truths this morning, but they will not be accepted there. You had better answer me now. Did you tell the magistrates that Captain De Witt interfered because you cried out in terror for help from Mr. Robert?’

‘Not exactly, miss. I told them Mr. Robert frightened me a bit.’

‘Do you know, Lucy, that your witness may decide Captain De Witt’s fate? Do you realize that if you leave a word of the truth unsaid, and so tend to convict him, you will be in God’s sight a murderer as wicked as he who murdered Mr. Robert?’

Lucy sobbed violently.

‘Did you not hear anything at all, see nothing more as you ran away towards the

cottage?’ continued the stern voice ; and Nell half unconsciously grasped her companion by the arm.

Lucy gave one terrified glance up into the white set face bent above hers, and then covered her face with her shawl.

‘I did ! I did !’ she cried. ‘Oh, Miss Nell, I won’t lie to you ! I heard a sound like a fall, and I glanced round, and Mr. Robert was still standing where he had been, but not the Captain.’

‘So that you suppose that Captain De Witt had fallen, or perhaps been knocked down by Mr. Robert.’

‘Oh, miss, how can I tell ? I know no more than I have told you, if I was to die for it ! I heard them quarrelling, but I didn’t catch the words. Then I heard a scrimmage, and I saw Mr. Robert standing alone. After that I got to the cottage, and

ran upstairs to my room. I durstn't stop to see no more. I could tell you nothing else if you was to turn me inside out !'

'Why did you keep this from the magistrates this morning, Lucy? Did you not know you were acting wickedly in keeping it back?'

'I don't know, miss. I hadn't told it father at first, nor no one since, and I was afraid to alter my story now. It didn't seem to make much difference. And I was so shook like and so frightened, I scarcely knew rightly what I did say and what I didn't. But I've told you everything now—God help me, I have !'

Nell stood for a moment pondering and silent.

'You have done enough wrong for one day,' she said at length coldly; 'go and repent of it, if you have any conscience.'

‘Oh, Miss Nell, don’t speak so cruel to me! Say you forgive me. I didn’t mean no wrong to any one.’

‘I will forgive you when you have spoken the whole truth—out—in court; when—it comes on; not before. You are a poor creature, Lucy Barrett; you would risk the life of a fellow-creature to save your own feelings. You are not worth being angry with. Go—I have done with you!’

And leaving the weeping girl, Nell turned away and passed out of sight. The narrow path to the stile looked dim before her, and, as she turned into the avenue, the evening shadows were deepening fast, but she forgot to feel nervous now. The thoughts burning within her brain were too absorbing to admit of any mere personal terrors. How would Lucy’s new admissions affect Barrington’s case? Would they serve to good

or evil report on the trial? Surely to good, in so far as they corroborated his own story. Ah! terrible as that day, the day of the trial, would be to her, would God that it were here now—that it were to-morrow! It was now only the beginning of February; the assizes would not be held until March. How would he ever get through those six interminable weeks; how would he ever bear the suspense of that long, long period? She—terrible as it seemed in prospect to her—would have her occupations, her duties, her outside world to interest and assist her; but he—what would he have? Nothing! nothing but solitude and foreboding thought—nothing but white-washed walls and a bare cell, from which even God's sky was excluded.

‘God help you, my darling!’ she murmured passionately, as she pictured the

scene to herself, and thought of him sitting now, depressed and miserable, in his lonely prison, or perhaps pacing the narrow floor with restless tread. 'Oh,' she continued, pressing her hands against her eyes as if to keep out that mental vision which seemed to scorch itself into her brain as if by fire— 'oh, if I might but bear it for you, my darling! If I might but be in your place now, and you walking here free beneath the heavens! If I could but tell you, only once again, how dear you are to me, how deeply, how yearningly I love you! I never let you see it half enough. If you could only know it now! If I could but give you one more kiss, come but just once to you in prison! Oh, Barrington, if I could die to save you all this pain, how readily I would do it!'

She had paused in the middle of the

long, dark avenue, and spoke the last words aloud with a bitter cry that there was no one by to hear, and of which she herself was unconscious. But the next moment she wiped away her blinding tears, and walked on resolutely.

‘I must not give way,’ she said to herself; ‘I must be cheerful and keep up. When he comes out after his acquittal, he will want strength and encouragement and consolation. How will it be if he finds me weak, and worn, and broken-down in spirit? No, I will be brave for his sake. What should break my spirit, so long as I know he and his love are still all mine?’

CHAPTER VII.

FOUND GUILTY.

‘ Mon cœur nage incertain comme sur des mers sombres,
Ne pouvant ni toucher le fonds, ni voir le bord
Entre le desespoir, ou le crime, ou la mort !’

LAMARTINE.

It was late in the afternoon of the 20th of March. The day had been exquisite, one of those transient foretastes of spring which at times slip out so unexpectedly even in our inclement clime, as if to bid our hearts rejoice in the recollection that warmth and flowers and sweet clear sunshine have existed, and will again exist in the new year coming on. But do these happy prophecies speak to all with the same voice ? Are there not times when

earth's glad freshness falls like a dumb sarcasm on the bitterness of our human hearts, and when the storm within us makes us shrink with a sore distaste from the unsympathetic mood of a sweet, calm world without?

All day long the sun had been streaming in through the high windows of the courthouse at Tentbury, gleaming through dusty panes upon the judge on his lofty seat, on the white wigs of the barristers beneath, on the prisoner at the bar, and the crowded audience. One cruel ray had even sought to emphasize the incongruity between the smiles of nature and the stern occupations of man, by falling direct upon the pale face of the prisoner, and across his head, where it lit up a streak of gold upon the short brown hair; whilst, just behind him, dancing down the causeway of dust

into the shadowy depths of the dock, floated a stream of many-coloured motes, blue and green and gold.

All day long De Witt had stood there beneath the pitiless gaze of his fellow-creatures and the pale rays of the half-wintery sun. Silently motionless he stood, as if in a dream; whilst witness after witness came forward, and contributed their quota to the story of guilt that seemed even to his eyes so neat and clear a chain of evidence. Some there were in court who loved as well as knew the man, and to their eyes there appeared a great change in him since his arrest. His bronzed face had lost its colour and roundness; there was a stern look in the blue eyes, and new, hard lines about the closed, defiant mouth. When first he came into court, he had held himself upright as a man

could be, and had fixed his eyes with a determined gaze upon the gaping crowd around him, whilst a bitter smile had been for a moment or two upon his lips. Now, however, as the hours wore away, and the cruel monotony of the testimony he had for the most part heard before went on and on, his shoulders drooped a little, like that of one wearied to death with the fight, and his gaze sank to the ground. And Sir Simon and John Ponsonby, looking at his countenance, wondered at the havoc already worked by suffering in the bright, insouciant face, and asked themselves which of the two expressions—the stern defiance or the apathetic depression—were the most unlike to the careless geniality of the features of old. It was only when, all unexpectedly to himself, De Witt's former Colonel stepped into the box to give

evidence to the character for extreme kindness and gentleness of disposition always borne by the prisoner whilst in the service, a testimony followed up by one or two more—that a sudden flush came over the sallow face, and a quick light into the uplifted eyes. For a moment his lips trembled; and the emotion awakened could only be repressed by a stern effort, as the counsel for the prosecution in cross-examination strove to shake this evidence somewhat.

‘Good-natured and kindly, you tell us—tender-hearted in fact, to the best of your belief, the prisoner always was. But was he never given to a transitory fit of passion or impatience? Had he never a quick temper?’

‘Every kind-hearted person I am acquainted with has more or less a quick temper.’

‘Yourself, for instance?’

‘Myself, for instance.’

‘But you have not answered my question.’

‘In my opinion, I never knew a less revengeful temper or a better disposition than that of Captain De Witt. He was the last man in the world to commit the crime imputed to him.’

‘But he was subject to occasional fits of passion—like all kind-hearted people?’

‘By no means, sir. I think it is even possible he might have kept his temper with you, which is more than I am able to do’—a retort which, although made in all sincerity and earnestness by the grey-haired Colonel, who was truly of a somewhat choleric nature, created a titter of amusement in court, and called for a more stinging reply from the worsted Q.C.

De Witt’s counsel did all he could for him. He was a quiet, painstaking man,

not particularly eloquent, but a thoughtful, careful person, much esteemed in his line of business.

Barrington's first thought had been of Ponsonby ; and it might be said that, from the moment he first heard of the case, Ponsonby's most earnest desire had been to take part in the defence of the man for whom he had conceived a desultory but very sincere regard ; but it could not be. Ponsonby was not upon that circuit, and professional etiquette forbade his accepting the brief. His interest in the case, however, was such that he could not keep away, and he attended all day in court as an eager auditor and spectator. From the first moment he had never had a doubt of De Witt's innocence, but after hearing the evidence for the prosecution, had little hope of his acquittal. His keen mind turned the evidence round and

round, and his hawk-like eyes fixed themselves upon each witness in turn ; but he could find no serious flaw in the string of testimony. The only hope of salvation lay in diverting suspicion upon some one else ; and this appeared to be impossible. The only person of whom the prisoner seemed to entertain the least suspicion was Jim Barrett, and this suspicion, he was forced to acknowledge, had led to nothing. He had himself, *en amateur*, gone over to Kiltersgate, the village where the younger gamekeeper still was employed, and questioned both him and his acquaintances upon the subject, but had succeeded in eliciting nothing of any importance. The young man appeared to him of a stolid, stupid sort, incapable of planning out the scheme imputed to him, even had it not seemed clear that he had never left the neighbourhood of his

employment on the evening in question. Rodderhampton was a good ten miles from the Cedars, and on the day of the murder he had been seen busy till nightfall at his usual avocations, in which he was again engaged at the accustomed hour the following morning on the arrival of the police. He slept alone in a cottage on the borders of the property, but, on searching there, nothing had appeared in any way to excite the suspicions of those sent to inquire. His clothes were as usual; there was no trace of blood, no implement with which to inflict violence, about the place; the bed had apparently been slept in, all things appeared in a natural condition, and the young man himself exhibited a quiet indifference scarcely compatible with the guilt of murder.

John Ponsonby confessed himself completely puzzled, and agreed with the police

in mentally acquitting the man De Witt suspected. No ; there was some one else—some other with a personal grudge against Robert Brereton. Was that not conceivable enough, considering the kind of life the young man was reputed to have led ? But who it was, was at present, he decided, an inscrutable mystery ; and that it was possible it might remain so for ever he could not deny. The eager, clear-sighted face grew anxious as the hours wore on and the case drew to its close, and the thin sarcastic lips were pressed together with a concentrated irritation that was John Ponsonby's outward manifestation of mental pain. The evidence for the prosecution seemed to him, though all of a circumstantial character, so terribly crushing ; that for the defence of so hopelessly vague and general a nature. It was all very well for friends to crowd round and

give a suspected man a good character ; but such evidence proved nothing more than his general popularity, and a murderer had been popular before now in general society. For a case such as this, to confute evidence so telling as this, nothing except the proving of an alibi could send a man out of court with a clean bill of health. And even if, by some fluke or commiseration of the jury, he were acquitted, what would life in De Witt's social position be worth, with the stigma of such an acquittal for ever attached to his name ? And Ponsonby's face grew more and more serious, and he avoided glancing towards the bowed head of the prisoner. It was not the first time he had seen an innocent man—or one he believed to be innocent—convicted, but it was the first time such a person had been found amongst the number of his friends. He

knew well what the verdict must be, more especially after the summing-up of the judge, who seemed to him to lean more strongly than was necessary towards the view of the prisoner's guilt; there could be but one ending to it all, unless by the improbable chance of some independent and obstinate jury-man. But no one knew better than himself how slender a chance this was. It appeared as if every one who was not acquainted personally with De Witt believed in his guilt; and on what grounds did the persuasion of his innocence with the others rest? Simply on their instinctive conviction of the natural goodness, uprightness, and gentleness of the man—grounds strong enough perhaps to those holding them, but naturally of little legal weight against the amalgamated evidence of the other side.

Had he, however, turned towards the prisoner, he would have seen him more powerfully moved by the judge's address than by any previous incident of the day, save the generous testimony of his Colonel and fellow-officers. The evidence De Witt had all heard before, the counsel for the prosecution was paid to vilify him and attempt to prove his guilt—all that was in the natural order of things, and no more than he expected. But the judge was, it was to be presumed, a gentleman, an unbiassed auditor, a man of marked intelligence and of the strictest justice. And what was his impartial opinion, delivered in that calm, commanding voice, so free from heat, so apparently merciful in its choice of words—a manner, a voice, a judgment that must bear with overwhelming weight upon the twelve jury-men who sat listening to him

with so respectful an air—nay, that almost for the moment persuaded Barrington himself of the force of the arguments, the truth of the conclusions? An opinion clothed in but few legal phrases, clearly expressed, slowly enunciated, that he—De Witt—was a felon and a murderer! His lordship no doubt was used to varied expressions on the features of the many wretched men and women constantly placed before him in the dock, and troubled himself but little to note such things, else might he have been struck somewhat by the occasional glances fixed upon him by the prisoner during the course of his speech—glances at first wondering and amazed, then indignant, but at the last merely curious and indifferent.

When at length the jury left the box to reflect upon their decision, then Ponsonby

cast one look towards the pleasant companion with whom he had idled away so many a sunny hour at Naples, and saw that his eyes were fixed and his features expressionless. It seemed as if the summing-up had been the last insult he could bear, and as if he took no longer any interest in the matter, nor even for the moment cared to know now whether the voice of the jury proclaimed his conviction or his acquittal. But Ponsonby had scarcely noticed this before the twelve men shuffled back into their places, and from their speedy return he augured the worst of results. He was not mistaken, as in a clear loud voice the foreman replied to the judge's query by the one terrible, simple word, 'Guilty, my lord. But,' he added, 'we wish to recommend him to mercy on the ground of supposed provocation.'

The prisoner seemed to experience no

surprise or emotion at the verdict, and he did not look up until asked by the judge, in the usual formula, as to whether he had any reason to give why judgment should not be pronounced upon him.

Then he raised his head slowly and looked the judge full in the face.

‘I am innocent of the murder of Robert Brereton,’ he said, ‘or of any knowledge of it. I never saw him after I fell backwards myself, and he was then alive and uninjured. You can hang me, but you cannot make me guilty; and in that case you will be blood-shedders, not I.’

The few words, spoken so calmly, created a sensation in court; but the next moment all eyes were turned from the prisoner towards one of the benches not far behind.

‘True—quite true!’ sobbed a voice, Sir Simon’s. With his handkerchief spread

over his face, he sat swaying himself backwards and forwards in uncontrollable grief.

But the smile which rose involuntarily to the lips of one or two of the spectators died quickly out the next moment, and the prisoner seemed one of the few to whom the reappearance of the judge in the fatal black cap did not bring a shudder.

And as the concluding phrase, sounding so bitter a mockery of human justice,—‘And may the Lord have mercy upon your soul,’—fell upon his ears, Ponsonby, who had so often before heard it unmoved, suddenly turned sick, and gathering up his hat and stick, slipped hastily out before the mass of his fellow-auditors.

It was all over now—the day’s work, the day’s suspense—a human body had been consigned to violent death, a human soul to despair; and the barristers were eagerly

chatting and the clerks joking as they tied up their green bags, whilst the on-lookers elbowed and jostled each other out of the air-exhausted building.

Ungentle hands began to pull the prisoner forward, and he suddenly started, and awakened from his dream. A pall seemed at the same moment to fall between himself and the outside world, and those who observed him yet saw a grey pallor sweep across his features. Before his senses had come a new revelation—the realization, as never before realized, that now at last he had done with all that to living man constitutes existence. And in the horror of that moment his spirit revolted, and eternal truth became a mockery. A streak of sunshine lay across his path, and he turned away his eyes from it. Why should this moral blight have fallen upon him? What

had he ever done that he should be singled out for degradation deep as this? Had he ever scoffed at the Deity that the Deity should now desert him—should make a lie to seem as truth? He had been no unbeliever, no evil liver. If he had not always served the Almighty, he had at any rate believed in Him; if his life had not always been a lofty one, it had at any rate been pure. Now all was over—hope, honour, life itself; before him shame, disgrace, and death. His brain reeled with the confusing visions of a drunken man, as silently, apathetically he moved onwards, letting himself be hurried forward—looking on, as it were, with a sort of vague impersonal wonder at the scene in which he took a central part.

It could not be himself, Barrington De Witt, born to social position and the respect of his inferiors, who was now

silently suffering these insults from low hands—insults which a few weeks ago would have been so swiftly and surely punished? No, it was not he, it was no longer the frank and fearless gentleman, it was not even a man young and strong and spirited—it was a criminal condemned to death, an outlaw beyond the reach of pity, of self-respect, a creature haggard and broken and lost. An exclamation from one of his companions caught his ear. It was but a muttered oath, caused by the stupid movements of the prisoner he conducted; but De Witt turned upon him with a laugh such as might echo through the despairing vaults of hell.

‘God!’ he said, opening his dry lips with an effort; ‘there is no God, man—call on something else!’

CHAPTER VIII.

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

‘And what is our failure here but a triumph’s evidence
For the fulness of the days? Have we withered or
agonized?’

Why else was the pause prolonged but that singing
might issue thence?

Why rushed the discords in, but that harmony should
be prized?’

R. BROWNING.

READER, who in your opinion is most
worthy of the name of hero? One who
has scaled the enemy’s heights, leading the
van amid fire and flame of war; the man
who can calmly face a gang of mobbed
ruffians or the armed assassin at midnight;
he (or maybe she) who walks unconcerned

and smiling on his or her errand of mercy, amid the horrors of foul disease or appalling epidemic—who feels no shrinking from the agonies of cholera or the loathsome contamination of leprosy? Ay, grand and inspiring are such examples, specimens of a noble manhood, of a Christ-like unselfishness; yet to my mind is there one example loftier still.

It is that of a human being doomed to lowest depths of degradation by his fellow-men, deemed an outcast, a very earth-encumbrance by all who yet preserves his moral equilibrium, retains his self-respect, and, folding calm arms, can shut his ears to the dismal clamour of earth's detractors, and, without conceit as without self-exaltation, can look upwards and say, unmoved, 'God lives, and God knows best!'

But are not such men rare upon the

earth? Ay, surely they must ever be so, so long as humanity is formed of flesh and blood, so long as human hearts and human hopes are centred in the affections, the opinions, the respect of our fellow-creatures. Was not even a Savonarola bowed to the earth by the scorn and hatred of his fellow-men? did not even a Saint Peter recant when human honour failed his Master?

Probably is there no mortal anguish greater than these social downfalls, no test more cruel than the sudden stripping away of all this world's support, to bring us face to face, naked and ashamed, before ourselves and God.

Of De Witt I make no ideal character; I describe him as he was—a man strong and proud and upright, in the first flush of youth and life and energy; yet now for awhile crushed and battered out of

moral shape, lost to self-respect for a passing moment, by the overwhelming force of this unexpected blow, this cruel turn of fortune's wheel.

When at length he found himself shut once more into his narrow cell, shut in this time with despair for his only companion, with the inscription written above his door in letters of fire, 'Let those who enter here leave hope behind,' with the greyness of twilight falling around him, and the long hours of a night of endless horror stretching forth before him, it seemed to him that his brain reeled, and that he no longer knew himself or could command his thoughts. He sat for a time motionless, his head bowed upon his hands, beyond the power of consecutive thought, beyond the consciousness of outward things, of time and place. Then he rose, and with

clenched hands paced with increasing fever up and down the gloomy den. The food brought to him he rejected with loathing. But when at length the lights were all out, night had begun, and he was forced into the cruel mockery of lying down, then the true nightmare of the silent hours began. A darkness peopled with shapes of unutterable horror, visions too vague and awful to put into words—a silence broken only by the occasional tramp, tramp of the night warder on his rounds. Then it was that the exhaustion and the apathy of the day's long tension melted slowly away; and in place of it came a realization of facts piercing in its keenness, a picturing of details worse than the very bitterness of death for vivid exactitude.

How soon would the end come? He knew not. A few days of this mortal

agony, of this maddening life in death, and then the sweeping away into the black oblivion of disgrace. Why not to-morrow? why not at once? Why did they not take a man at once out of court, straight from conviction and the sentence, and hang him there and then, before he had time to realize every detail of the horrors before him, before he had time to die the death a thousand times? Was this human mercy? Was it not rather the devilish ingenuity of the gloating fiends? They said it was to give the convict time for repentance, time to think upon his God—to pray for pardon, and prepare for death. Fools! who could think of repentance with his mind poisoned by details so sickening? who could call upon the God who had permitted him to come to such an end as this? A few more days—three or four,

perhaps five or six—and then this warm living, breathing body, this strong identity, this individual personality, all these surging thoughts, these burning passions, these human interests and human loves, would exist no longer, would actually be no more—gone whither? These strong limbs, whose veins were full of circulating blood, this pulse that beat so fiercely, would be but part of an inert, lifeless mass—the animating power withdrawn from it, the hot life wrenched violently out of it—a mere distorted lump of flesh and blood, a person, an *I*, no longer!

Before him came the whole long ghastly vision—the waking on that last morning, the last look at sun and light, the last breathing of the crisp morning air—the air free to all, nature's gift to feed the healthy human frame, but no longer needed

for him ; the last touch upon the furniture of his cell, and the knowledge that the hands that felt those substances would in another hour be limp and cold ; the putting on of his clothes for the last time—clothes to be stripped off with a callous and unseemly haste ere the morning's sun had set. Then the entrance of that cruel mockery of kindness, the chaplain ; and finally of the executioner, with his business-like air and face, and the cords within his grasp ; the pinioning of the limbs which God had given for enjoyment, for usefulness ; the slow procession, out through the door for the last time, down the long corridor, into the square courtyard ; the parson reading aloud those awful words of the Burial Service. What ! 'earth to earth, ashes to ashes' ? never ! That was fit language for those already dead, or who

might be lying at their last gasp on the bed of suffering and weakness ; but for him, Barrington De Witt, fierce and full-blooded and active, what was their signification ? Nothing but a monstrous farce, the burlesque of mocking devils !

Then the mounting of the steps, the facing of the gallows, the arrangement of the rope, and the one last despairing look towards the heaven that had deserted him, before the white cap was drawn over the face ; the moment's awful pause, as a human being waited in the dark solitude and silence of his agony for the sudden drop that was to jerk the very body and soul apart, and take him in one moment out of the freshness of the early spring morning, the cool sweetness of the outside air, the full consciousness of life and pain, into the vague and fathomless region of the Hereafter !

Then, as if himself a spectator at the awful scene and not the victim, De Witt beheld the taking down of the lifeless body, the gaze of curious eyes fixed upon the distorted features, the doctor's inspection of the still half-quivering limbs, the irreverent handling of the mangled corpse, the coarse touch of unloving fingers, the flinging into the rude coffin, the hurried and unhallowed burial in the felons' ground. A name wrapped in oblivion, the story of a life hidden away, a memory bringing shame and shuddering to all who recalled it. 'Good were it for that man if he had never been born !'

Why then had he been born ? Could he have averted, by any deed of his, the fate which had befallen him ? 'Curse God and die !' Was that to be his end, the summing-up of his life of twenty-eight years ?

No ! it should not be—he would *not* die the felon's death ! Why should a man tamely give up that which was his own, bestowed upon him by the Creator, simply at the bidding of his fellow-man ? If he had committed the crime, yes ; both reason and justice then called for retribution ; but, for the innocent so to submit, was it not to show cowardice on his own part, and assign to others the crime ascribed to him, that of murder ? Better to put an end to his own life, better to fight for it, better anything than to brand a dead name with the burning, undying shame of the gallows ! Better for Nell—ah ! it was madness to think of her !—better for her a thousand times that he should die another death ! Death ! what was it in itself to him now ? A relief, a necessity, the only and blessed release from the burden of a life no longer

bearable ; only one quick plunge into the dark waters whose shadows had for ever closed around all the hopes and happinesses of this present world. And what to her ? The best and easiest solution of her sore trouble, the quickest ending to her throes of pain and humiliation ; the only balm for her aching, wounded heart. Yes, his death was best for both of them ; and for his part he could say truly he feared it not. How could a man fear death to whom life could be but purgatory ? But not *that* death—not the death of the shame-abandoned criminal, not the public execution, not the death of the sensational penny-a-liner, the callous reporter, of the black flag, the outside crowd of greedy idlers !

Hour by hour these thoughts and fancies spread and multiplied, till it was doubtful whether the brain that gave birth to them

were not becoming more and more insane, and until the first grey light of early dawn crept slowly and coldly through the iron bars of the little lofty window.

Then at last, for a few short minutes, nature collapsed, exhausted ; and De Witt fell into a troubled half-slumber, in which, however, the nightmare visions, instead of fading, only took more monstrous shapes, and the present became more terribly merged in the future. For a few moments only ; then the heavy door turned upon its hinges, and swung quickly open ; and as the outside light fell upon his face, Barrington sprang up suddenly.

The short few moments of disturbed sleep had only tended further to cloud his brain, instead of clearing it from the foul cobwebs of the past long hours, and he leapt from his bed like one in a delirium.

Before the man had time to retire, he had thrown himself upon him with the ferocity of a wild beast, shouting wild, incoherent words.

‘Kill me!’ he exclaimed hoarsely, his voice ringing down the still cold corridor. ‘Kill me, or I will kill you!’

There was a sharp short struggle, during which the warder scarcely found breath to call for help. De Witt already had the better of the man, who was but half his size and weight, when two more warders appeared upon the spot, running hastily to the assistance of their fellow. But it was several minutes before they had succeeded in worsting their victim, whose frenzy, which for a moment had abated on finding his first opponent no match for him, now redoubled on being confronted with two others.

In truth he knew not why he fought, nor had he any object in fighting; it was simply the brute madness which had taken possession of him, and which for the moment gave him that thirst for blood which is the natural appetite of the brute beast. Like a brute he fought—madly, blindly, ferociously, without science, without reason, but with the fierce energy and power of one possessed by demons.

And so the three warders thought, as at length, the fierce struggle over, they had their prisoner down upon the ground, vanquished and secured.

‘By the powers! Jim,’ said one to the other, wiping his brow and panting, ‘but the devil’s in the fellow, and no mistake. He’s a neat gallows’ bird. I suppose he thinks he may as well swing for two as one!’

And yet his friends had said, his fellow-officers had borne witness, and all who knew him would have sworn to their belief, that never existed a disposition gentler, a nature less prone to violence, than that of Barrington De Witt. Nay, he would have said it of himself, and spoken in all honesty.

God save us, one and all, from the madness of despair! God keep us from ever finding out the lowest depths of our own nature, from breaking through the crust of our customary self-command into that boiling volcano of animal passion that lies somewhere concealed within the bosom of most men!

CHAPTER IX.

A RAY IN THE DARKNESS.

‘Sorrow is hard to bear, and doubt is slow to clear,
Each sufferer says his say, his scheme of the weal
and woe;
But God has a few of us whom he whispers in the
ear.—R. BROWNING.

THE mood that succeeded De Witt's fit of frenzy was one of the most perfect apathy. This is generally the case. These sudden violent emotions exhaust the powers of nature, and a condition almost comatose is apt to supervene. During the long dark hours spent in the loathsome punishment cell whither he had been conveyed, and into which he had been roughly flung, he remained in a condition in which thought,

feeling, and even reason seemed in abeyance—conscious of little, full of a vague exhaustion of mind and body. So motionless was he physically and so apathetic mentally, that the verdict of the doctor released him before his time, and he found himself once more in his little barren cell before nightfall. Here he soon fell into a deep sleep, from which he awoke before dawn refreshed, and restored to his mental faculties. But the awakening brought with it a new shame, a fresh wound to poison and embitter thought. Clearly before him rose all the incidents of the last twenty-four hours; and, as he passed them in review, mapped out one beside the other with cruel distinctness, a hot flush mounted to his forehead, and he said to himself with unflinching self-scorn, ‘I have been a coward! I have lost my nerve in the face of shame and humiliation;

I have lowered myself to the level of these poor brutes put to guard me.'

Even now he could not rise above himself; even now, acknowledging this fact, he could not regain the lost spark of the divine in his manhood; he could not look above, beyond the shame, the disgrace, the human injustice, the human rebellion; even now his mind was absorbed in the sullen callousness of a despair more deeply embittered by its superadded self-loathing.

And then, during the course of the day—was it that day or the next? for in a condition of mind such as his the measurements of time pass vaguely—the chaplain came to visit him; and this seemed but another unnecessary stab added to the bitterness of death. Why could they not let him alone—leave him for the few days of life still permitted him, if to a madden-

ing solitude of thought, yet at any rate free from an insult that at the moment seemed even more cruel than the rest? Why should he be forced to meet one of his own rank—a gentleman and a man of education—and to listen to words of well-meant advice that were as gall and wormwood to an innocent man? The chaplain was bound to think him guilty, no doubt; he did not quarrel with him for that; but why should he be forced to listen to him? The evil opinion, the rough coarseness of the warders he could bear with indifference—they affected him but little; but the presence of this social equal who spoke to him as to a criminal, if in a friendly tone, and who adjured him to repent of his sin whilst yet time remained, was a different matter. He had received his sentence, his life was to be forfeited—could they do

more? Why then must they add this too to their tale of bricks? was it not enough to die, without being tortured first?

At length he turned upon his visitor, a stout good-humoured-looking Irishman—just the sort of man, De Witt felt with a touch of sad humour, who would probably be the life of a bachelor dinner-party, or of any symposia where the jokes were free and the wine-supply liberal, but whose face was just now lengthened to an abnormal solemnity befitting the occasion.

‘You come here, I suppose,’ he remarked shortly, ‘because it is your duty? It cannot be an occupation congenial to you, judging from your expression, that of paying visits of sympathy to men about to be hanged?’

The chaplain’s eyes shifted uneasily beneath De Witt’s cold gaze.

‘It is my duty, my friend,’ he replied.

‘But I also come in the sincere desire to benefit your soul, to lead you to a sense of God’s mercy, and your own need of repentance.’

‘God’s mercy at the present moment does not appear to me overwhelming,’ observed De Witt; ‘and as regards my need of repentance, you are by your position as a clergyman entitled to stand above me, but how do you know that personally I have more to repent of than you have?’

The chaplain paused discomfited.

‘If you say less to me about the forgiveness of my own sins and more about forgiving those of other people,’ continued the prisoner, ‘I might be more inclined to listen to you.’

‘Oh, my friend, that is of minor importance to you. What you have now to think of is to try to square your own account

with the Deity. You have not many days to do it in.'

'I know it. And do you think that is a soothing thought?'

'Do not be so hard. Break down this wall of pride before it is too late.'

'Pride!' and Barrington laughed bitterly. 'Is it possible for a man going to the gallows to preserve so aristocratic a pretension as pride?'

'I do not wonder that you feel the shame more bitterly than most. To some it is the mere terror of death, but to you it is far more. *Why* do such as you, well-born and well-educated, put yourselves within the pale of the criminal law? Why do you not learn to check your unbridled passions in time?'

There was a look of real interest on the chaplain's fat face, and a ring of real

compassion in his voice, that for a moment struck home to the sore heart he had endeavoured to probe.

‘Sir,’ said De Witt, a little less calmly than before, ‘have there been in your experience no innocent persons condemned to death?’

‘I have never known of one.’

‘But there may be?’

‘It is possible, certainly.’

‘Try then to put yourself in such a man’s place. Suppose yourself tried, convicted, and about to be executed on a charge of which you were as innocent as the babe unborn; would not even your kindly nature be soured, would not even you, with all your faith, your experience of the best forms of consolation under such circumstances, feel sorely tempted to use the words of the fool in your bitterness, and say, “There is no God”?’

‘God forbid! But of what use are such suppositions? Is it not merely a wile of the devil which tempts you away from what should now be the main object of your reflections?’

‘Of no use certainly. But if you wish to serve me, how can you expect me to listen to one who offers me the greatest insult I can ever know?’

‘Insult?’

‘That of believing me guilty of this crime.’

‘I am not bound to say whether I believe you guilty or innocent. God only can know that for certain. Man can but judge according to his ability.’

‘But according to your ability you believe me guilty?’

‘How can I answer you, my friend? I did not even hear the case. As a rule,

however, the law is justice in this our land, thank God. But put all that aside. Even if innocent, is it not the part of a wise man to prepare for the future, to reflect upon how to meet his God?’

‘I am not a wise man.’

‘Let us pray, my friend; prayer can but do us good.’

‘No,’ said De Witt, turning away; ‘I wish for no prayers. Prayer would be a mockery to me now, offered up by you. You mean kindly, and I thank you. You have fulfilled a disagreeable duty,’ and a mirthless smile rose for a moment to his lips, ‘and tried to be courteous over it, for which I doubly thank you. But if any privileges are accorded to criminals such as I, I would ask you to leave me undisturbed until—until the end, in my obstinacy and impenitence.’

The chaplain paused a moment without replying. Then he suddenly fell upon his knees—perhaps in his heart a little fearing the effect of this movement on the prisoner, but determined to do his duty.

He was not, possibly, a man of high spiritual tone, or of elevated life; but he was a plucky fellow, and conscientious according to his, somewhat narrow, lights. He was relieved to find that his companion made no remonstrance or disturbance of any kind, appearing, in fact, deaf and blind to the proceeding. The prayer—one straightforward, simple, and earnest enough—over, the chaplain rose, and with one more glance, half-appealing, half-disappointed, towards the prisoner, took his departure, and silence and solitude once more reigned supreme within the cell.

But the softening process which refused

to be brought about by the coarse though well-meaning touch of the prison chaplain, fell only a few hours later on De Witt's arid heart, induced by other means.

It was the morning of the next day, and he was sitting as usual, lethargic and apathetic, staring at the white-washed walls with a growing exhaustion, when his midday meal was served to him. He had turned from the coarse fare with a feeling of disgust, when he suddenly became aware of the warder's eye fixed upon him through the spying-hole placed in the wall of each cell. The man seemed to take a particular interest in his appetite that morning, and presently called to him in a gruff voice to get up and eat his dinner. Something about his tone roused a sudden suspicion in De Witt's mind, and approaching the dinner tin, he observed

it attentively, and then perceived a small piece of paper sticking out from beneath the bread lying on the dish. At the same moment he became aware that the warder's eye vanished from the inspection hole. An instant later he had seized the missive, and discovered it to be a folded envelope, well secured, and with a few lines only of writing inside. He had barely taken possession of it, and had not yet had time to unseal it, when his door opened suddenly and the warder entered. The paper was secreted in De Witt's hand, but a moment had sufficed to see the handwriting, and he looked, as he felt, ready to fight to the death for its possession. The warder, however, seemed oblivious of his clenched hand.

‘No. 4004,’ he said roughly, ‘your cell is in a vile condition of dust and dirt. Keep

it tidier, do you hear! And how did I come to find some bits of paper in it yesterday, torn up?' (an invention). 'Mind I don't find no more of that sort of thing to-day, if you please. What's a prisoner got to do with letter paper, I should like to know? Writin' and receivin' letters is contrary to regulations, as all knows, and I should lose my place if I knowed of such a thing goin' on.'

Saying which, he retired as abruptly as he had entered, leaving De Witt in little doubt as to the true meaning of his peroration.

Then, feeling pretty secure of his treasure, he tore it open, devouring the words many times, whilst a gathering mist obscured them more and more before his eyes.

A line from Nell—a link with the outside world—a caress from one of the hearts that

still believed in him, still felt for him in his sore trouble and humiliation! A bit of paper that had been in her fingers, perhaps—who knows?—been pressed by her sweet lips before it made its secret way into this abode of misery and shame—a bit of paper on which she had poured out the yearning pain and grief and love of her loyal woman's heart. And, as he stood there alone in his cell, his back to the spy-hole, a faint ray of sunlight falling from the lofty window upon his head, still holding the letter in his hands, trying to re-read it for the third time, a flush rose to his colourless cheeks, his lips trembled, and his eyes filled with blinding tears.

‘Darling, darling, my heart is breaking for you! But still there is a God above men—still -I believe that we shall meet again in the hereafter, where an Innocent

Victim shall be our King. He knows you are pure-handed; and to me you will always be the noblest, the dearest of all men. Darling, my own, go to the end proudly, bravely; think only of God and of me. The parting will not be for long.

‘In this life and the next, your own

‘NELL.’

All the bitterness suddenly faded out of life, all the cruel injustice of fate was forgotten, as a great tide of love and tenderness swept in upon De Witt’s lonely soul, and filled it full to bursting with grateful thoughts and gentle memories.

‘God bless her!’ he murmured to himself; ‘God bless my queen! Yes,’ he continued, suddenly raising features changed and softened, shining with a new light, the light of human affection and of Divine trust, ‘there *is* a God—her God and mine. He

has not forgotten us ; no, not even in death and separation, not even in the depths of this mortal shame. We shall meet again, and understand it all in the new life, where love and justice go together. I will not doubt it any more. I will be a coward no more, God helping me !'

He drew himself together with a new energy of will, with a new strange feeling of calmness ; and the knees which had not bent before, dropped now upon the stone floor with an impulse he had no desire to resist. Self was conquered, the higher nature rose victorious, the struggle was over, and the bitterness of death became less bitter in that strange new self-renunciation, that confidence in a Divine Hand, a guiding power beyond the sphere of human understanding.

CHAPTER X.

VISIONS OF HORROR.

‘ I sat astonished, till the unmeaning light
Of dawn broke on my heart, and showed how bare
It was. The evening and the morning were
The first day of an empty life to me.’—B. M.

ALL that long day of the trial Nell had wandered about aimlessly, scarcely cognizant of things around her, scarcely conscious even that to-day was to be the turning-point of her own existence, so intense was her realization that it was one of life and death, both morally and physically, to the being she loved best on earth. On the chance of physical death, indeed, she dwelt but little; it seemed impossible for

her to realize that there was any fear of that—that her lover—that Barrington, in his youth and strength and ardent vitality—should be wiped out by the hand of the public executioner ; but the moral death—that she keenly appreciated and fully understood. She knew what the verdict of guilty must mean to one in his position, even putting aside the terrible realities of the punishment of penal servitude ; she could guess how even the verdict of an acquittal not based upon satisfactory evidence would poison the life-long happiness of a nature such as his, would send him back into the world marked, as he believed, with the brand of Cain upon his brow. She faintly foresaw, what she would not openly recognize even to her own heart, the social bar which such an acquittal would place between herself and him, the obstacle it

would prove to their union—an obstacle which she might strive to ignore, but which he would be the first to insist upon.

So the endless, weary day wore on, and came at last to a close, as it must do even to the wretched victim of disease, stretched upon his bed of torture, and longing for the night—the night of death's release.

Nell had felt unable to appear in the general sitting-rooms all day long, and her mother had not pressed her. Indeed, to both herself and her husband, but more especially to the latter, the girl's absence had been a great relief. Silent as she was, and had been upon the subject ever since the first, Mr. Brereton felt a strange repugnance to face the pale, still features of his step-daughter, and carefully avoided meeting the glance of her heavy eyes. This sort of behaviour was so new to Nell, with her

usual *vif*, impulsive character, this wordless suffering spoke of a pain and a reproach so much deeper than any she had ever known before, that Mr. Brereton felt himself to a certain degree subdued and over-awed by its presence. He was not, moreover, by any means utterly heartless; and notwithstanding his settled desire for revenge rather than justice upon the man whom he believed to have been his son's murderer, he could still find room for an occasional thought of pity towards the girl whose position was so terrible, and whose life was so broken up. But the existence of these mixed feelings, instead of making him gentler in manner, had the effect of greatly increasing his natural irritability; and at this period Mrs. Brereton's existence was not an enviable one. Vainly trying to soothe a husband whose excitement made him restless and

ill-tempered, full of a pitiful sympathy and anxiety for her only child, torn by the impossibility of an open agreement with both, undecided herself in opinion, and anxious only to accord with each in turns—this was a position many a woman of strong calibre might have found it hard to fill. Much more so poor Mrs. Brereton, who all her life long had never held much to an opinion of her own, and had dropped, as a vice, all pretensions to having one at all since her marriage !

Her heart, however, to-day was more with her daughter than her husband ; it ached to see the black lines under Nell's eyes, telling of sleepless nights ; the compressed lips speaking of a pain too great for words ; the restless, shifting glance that told of a mind far away. All day long she hovered with a sort of hopeless tenderness

about the girl, her eyes full of weakly appealing tears, until at last Nell could bear the strain no longer, and fled from the house into an unfrequented part of the garden. She felt a strange terror of this self-command of hers giving way ; it seemed to her that the flood-gates once opened to the display of emotion, the waters might come in even unto her soul and drown it. So she fled to outside solitudes, and there paced up and down the garden walks, as she had all morning paced up and down her bedroom floor.

At the end of an hour she returned towards the house, and as she did so, saw the figure of a man on horseback riding down the avenue. He had been to the front ; he had brought a note or a message—the day's work was over, Barrington's fate was settled ! For a moment she turned

sick and giddy ; then, conquering the weakness, moved on to go indoors.

Meanwhile, knowledge of the result of the day's proceedings had indeed already reached Mr. Brereton. There had not been wanting messengers willing enough to bring him news of the verdict, and one or two of these had already arrived at the back door and asked to see 'the master'; whilst a few moments later there came to the front entrance Colonel Stewart, and the man on horseback bearing a note. This note Mr. Brereton held in his hand as he went to meet his friend the Colonel in his study. Its contents were not of a nature calculated to soothe the nerves of an irritable man, and his face was purple as he advanced into the room.

'I know it!' he exclaimed, anticipating the words of Colonel Stewart; 'he is

convicted, thank heaven! And *there's* a neat sort of note to send to me—me, a county man and a magistrate! I've a good mind to prosecute him! Isn't it libellous, Stewart? I'm sure it is.'

Colonel Stewart took up the note and read it carefully through.

It was short, but seemed to bear signs of haste and agitation, the writing being almost illegible through shakiness. Thus it ran:

'SIR,

'You will no doubt be overjoyed to hear that your machinations have succeeded, and that an innocent man has just been convicted and sentenced to death. He whom you have hounded to death is ten times as upright and honourable as yourself, and, in the opinion of those who know him, owns a life far more valuable. May you some day have the comfort of realizing that you yourself are every whit as much a

murderer as the being, whoever it were, that killed your son, is the prayer of

‘SIMON DE WITT.’

‘Libellous, isn’t it?’ he repeated, as at length the Colonel, after a second perusal, laid it down. ‘Why shouldn’t I prosecute the fellow?’

Colonel Stewart shook his grey head slowly.

‘I should let it alone if I were you, Brereton,’ he said quietly. ‘It isn’t worth thinking of. No wonder Sir Simon is a little wild. You know,’ he added, after a pause, ‘that Captain De Witt is sentenced to the extreme penalty of the law?’

‘So they say; but I have no doubt they will manage to get him off somehow.’

‘Very little chance of it. True, there was a recommendation to mercy——’

‘And on what grounds? What possible

extenuation could they find of his atrocious crime ?'

'Probable provocation. Who knows which side began the quarrel, which struck the first blow ?'

'There is no reason to suppose my poor boy struck any blow at all. He was foully murdered.'

'And now his murderer is to suffer the full penalty of crime.'

'That is only justice. But they will get him off, you'll see.'

'No, they won't—they haven't time.'

'Why, when—when is it to be ?'

'The execution ? This day week.'

A change passed over Mr. Brereton's face, a slight quiver over his lips.

'I wish,' he muttered between his teeth—
—'I wish I hadn't asked the day !'

An expression not far from contempt

flitted for a moment across the Colonel's rugged features, and he gazed critically at his companion. In his heart—and a sturdy, upright heart it was, if a trifle stern—he found the latter a strange mixture of vindictiveness and of pusillanimity. Mr. Brereton was decidedly not of the stuff of which men, let alone heroes, are made, in the Colonel's opinion.

Meanwhile, Nell, crossing the hall with her hurried step, suddenly encountered her mother, who made a vain effort to escape out of her way. She turned, however, at the girl's imploring gesture, and followed her silently upstairs into her own room. Once there, Nell, unable to frame words, caught her mother's arm and gazed into her face in a speechless agony of inquiry.

‘Oh, my poor child!’ began Mrs. Brereton, the ready tears rising to her eyes.

But the expression of her features, without utterance of words, was answer sufficient.

‘He is convicted!’ said the girl, finding her voice at last in a strange low tone.

‘My poor Nell, I do feel for you!’

There was a moment’s pause; then Nell spoke again in the same tone.

‘What—what is the sentence?’

‘Oh, my child, don’t ask me—don’t ask me that!’

‘They—they have sentenced him to death—to be hanged?’ said Nell.

‘Don’t talk in that way, Nell, don’t! Oh, my child, you are going to faint!’

‘No,’ said the girl quietly, ‘I am not going to faint again. It—is—so, is it not?’

‘They will get him off perhaps, darling. Oh, I hope so!’

‘Why should they get him off? People

are hanged, aren't they—gentlemen sometimes?'

'Oh, Nell, Nell, my dear, try not to think of it!' said the foolish, weeping woman, putting her arm lovingly round her child.

But Nell shook off the caressing embrace with a shudder.

'Don't touch me!' she exclaimed, almost fiercely. 'To be hanged,' she repeated in the same low tone—'to be hanged on a gallows—Barrington—he—'

Then suddenly she flung up her head, and the white lips broke into a wild laugh, as for the third time she repeated the same ghastly words.

'I know it,' she said, gazing at her mother with glassy eyes, 'I know it all, and how they said it—"to be hanged by the neck until you be dead." Oh, God in heaven!'

Another ringing laugh—a laugh full of shuddering breaks, a laugh to bring a pang to a heart of stone, and Nell's gaze relaxed, her head fell forward, and Mrs. Brereton caught her in her arms. Oh, why could not that moment's blessed unconsciousness continue? thought the mother, as she bent with the tears streaming down her cheeks above her child, dreading to see the light of agony return to the closed eyes, and the quiver of mortal pain to the still pale lips. Why could she not give poor Nell an opiate to make her sleep on undisturbed until that terrible day was over, which surely, if it came to pass, would kill two people, not one—and the second an innocent, loving girl? Of all shipwrecks in this stormy world, was there any so pitiable as the shipwreck of a young and guiltless creature, broken up by a shame not her own, dragged

to death through the rocks upon which the one she loved had stranded?

That her child would never fully recover morally, if she did physically, from a shock such as this, Mrs. Brereton felt assured. For the first time in her life perhaps, at this moment she gauged the strength and depth of Nell's affections. But she had yet to learn to appreciate the force of the girl's character and the power of self-control and self-abnegation possessed by her.

The self-control did not come all at once. The demon of our passions, whether of grief or love, jealousy or anger, must first be striven with before he can be overcome. The victory is for those who fight; and the contest must often be a desperate one, sometimes wounding all but to death, before, faint and exhausted, we can sit down and say, 'It is over, I have won.'

So it was with Nell Lingwood all through the hours of that long black evening, and the still longer hours of the blacker night. Unable to remain still, unable to understand, nay, to see anything before her but the one awful vision of Barrington's fate, of Barrington's despair, she paced hour after hour up and down her room, turning with loathing from the food her mother pressed upon her, scarcely hearing the words of pity and condolence addressed to her.

Poor Mrs. Brereton was in despair. 'I don't know what to do for her, Edward,' she exclaimed in pitiful tones, as at last she returned to her husband's side after a vain effort to persuade her daughter to take either rest or refreshment of any sort; 'she doesn't speak to me or seem to hear me, and I can't get her to lie down. What can we do for her? I do believe she will go

mad ;' and Mrs. Brereton burst into tears for the twentieth time that day.

'Make her take a glass of port wine,' he said. 'You can surely persuade her to swallow that. Give her a good glassful. It may make her go to sleep,' and he actually went so far as to fetch the decanter himself from the dining-room, and place it in his wife's hands.

But this errand was as futile as the others ; for poor Mrs. Brereton, after toiling upstairs again with the bottle in her grasp, was unable to effect the desired persuasion.

'I shall leave the wine here,' she said tearfully. 'You will take it later on, won't you, Nell, to oblige me ? Do you want to break my heart ? Don't you care at all for any one but him ? I am your own mother, and it almost kills me to see you like this, and refusing all comfort. You will be ill

and die perhaps—and then what shall I do?’

The girl suddenly turned and fixed her hollow eyes upon her mother. Then she sat down and folded her hands in her lap, and for the first time answered coherently, even gently.

‘Mother,’ she said, in slow, disjointed sentences, ‘you are very good to me, and I know you care. But I am not ill indeed. I shall be—more like myself—to-morrow; but,’ and her lips quivered, ‘you cannot expect it to-night. I cannot talk to you or to any one. I am sorry if I am unkind. I think if you would all leave me alone, quite alone, just for to-night— I shall be better to-morrow, indeed I will; but leave me alone to-night.’

‘Let me have a bed in here and sleep with you, dear Nell.’

‘Oh, mother, it would drive me mad! Only let me be alone—a few hours. Indeed I am not ill—I will not be ill.’

‘You have had nothing to eat all day, Nell.’

‘I—I will try to drink a glass of wine soon, mother—if you will go,’ pleaded the poor girl.

And at length Mrs. Brereton, sorely against her will, left her; but not without a tearful embrace and a muttered blessing, that for some reason added fresh pangs to the aching heart. Why was she to be pitied, caressed, and blessed—perhaps by those who believed in the justice of the verdict and in the guilt of the innocent? God in heaven be thanked that *he* had no mother here on earth to see his end—to feel the sword pierce through her broken heart!

And now the house was still and silent; every one was gone to bed. Not a sound

anywhere, except an occasional rustle in the sycamore beside her window, and the tiny marble clock ticking softly upon her mantel-piece. Half-past eleven! Nearly seven hours more of darkness—more than seven hours of utter silence and solitude. There was no moon to-night, nothing but a cold dreary waste of blackness, as she pressed her face against the window-pane, and looked out. How was *he* spending the night? Would it not perhaps have been a comfort to him if one little ray of moonlight could have penetrated into his prison-cell and kept him company in his weary watch?

No! the moon was no companion for grief and pain, her rays were too cold and still and unsympathetic; she seemed an embodiment of man's ideal of the pure and passionless; she was no fit fellow-watcher in the human struggle, the human agony.

Ah! *he* would never see the moon shine again—never! It would not even gleam down in peaceful beauty upon the grave in which he slept. *His* grave would be between high prison walls, beneath a prison courtyard, polluted by the feet of the felons who came to die and those who came to see them die! She flung herself down and pressed her forehead against the window-sill. O God! that she might bear it for him! O God! that some of his load of agony might be laid upon her shoulders! nay, that she might mount the very gallows in his stead!

She was but a weak, cowardly woman; but love will make a woman at times stronger than the strongest man; and at that moment, Nell Lingwood would have laughed aloud with joy could she have taken Barrington's place, and laid down her life for his.

He could not, should not die ! The light in those dear blue eyes to be quenched, those dear lips, never without a smile for her, to quiver in the last throes of a shameful death—it could not be ! Anything, anything rather than that ! O God, if it were to be, that he might die rather in prison—alone, alone with only God and the angels looking on—not beneath the cool unpitying gaze of his cruel fellow-men !

Was she going insane ? Her brain whirled madly, and spectres of horror filled her eyes. She could no longer remain in her room ; she was choking. She opened the door and stepped out into the corridor. It was better to pace up and down in the darkness there.—But the clock in the hall was audible now, ticking, ticking so loudly—the moments that led each to his doom.

It was a maddening thought—the hands of time must for ever go on; and each tick made more near, more sure, his death.

Once more she was in her room. Only one o'clock yet! Would night never pass? Her fire was out long ago; she had not heeded its dying out; she had not attempted to undress herself.

It seemed to her at last as if she could bear it no longer.

‘I shall go mad if I cannot forget myself and him for an hour!’ she said to herself. Relief must be obtained at any price.

Just then her eyes fell upon the wine her mother had brought upstairs. Might not a few moments’ forgetfulness be obtained there?

With a trembling hand she poured out the liquid, and hastily swallowed it; then flung herself upon her bed, praying for sleep.

And the sleep came. But we cannot wholly cheat or circumvent nature. And the sleep of exhaustion born in the midst of pain, whether mental or bodily, is often but a distorted likeness of the sleep of nature and of health.

A vague weight, a vague misery was pressing still upon the girl's consciousness even during her fitful and broken repose; and shapes of horror—less distinct, but none the less horrible, than before—filled the mind's eye through closed eyelids. The continual nightmare was so horrible, the struggle between fact and phantasmagoria so ghastly, that semi-unconsciousness seemed to her worse than the very reality, and at length she sprang from her bed, determined to have done with it.

Going towards her washstand, she poured out a basinful of water, and plunged her

face into it several times. Her head and hands were hot and dry—the cold water was life-giving. It was better to be up than fighting in the dark with those shapes of darkness, and she flung herself upon her knees to pray for strength. Alas! had the greatness of her trouble dried up the springs of prayer? For no words came—she was conscious of nothing more than the dull throbbing of a paralyzing misery; and rose up unrefreshed. She looked at her little clock, ticking on so regularly. It was half-past five. Flinging her window wide open she leant out.

The morning air was cold and clear and fresh; already a faint pallor was appearing in the eastern sky, and the birds all around were busy whispering their first morning hymn. How pure and cool it all was! The great trees stood like ghostly sentinels

stretching out dim arms amid a silvery mist ; there was not a cloud upon the fading grey of the dome overhead, nor a rustle of wind to break the solemn stillness of early dawn. She knelt down before the window, and leaning her arms upon the sill, gazed out. By degrees the stillness filled her own soul, and the solemnity of creation cried peace to her aching heart.

The little birds had long ceased from their prefatory hymn, and once more folded small round soft heads beneath a downy wing for another hour's sleep ere rousing up to the real business of the day, before Nell raised her face, all wet and softened, from her arms, and rose to her feet. The battle was over, for a time at least. It might be that the struggle would have to be renewed with a more cruel insistence even than now ; but for the present she

could say to the demon of doubt and despair, 'Get thee behind me.'

When her mother, an hour later, came in, troubled and anxious, she found the girl quietly taking some things out of her drawers.

'Don't be startled, mother,' she said, with a calmness of tone that astonished the former; 'I have made up my mind to go to Miss Collyer's to-day. You know she has asked me several times. It will,' she added slowly, 'be better for me to go there.'

Yes, it was best for her to go there—with his relations, amongst those who loved him. Here she could do nothing, know nothing; she could not remain here—how could she? But *there* would be sympathy with her trouble; everything would be known there that could be known. Could they perhaps even be able to do

something for him? Such a thought made her limbs tremble, and sent the blood rushing feverishly through her veins. Was it perhaps possible? At any rate she would try to communicate with him; she would, she must write to him, if only two or three words of her yearning love. Here she saw no way of effecting her purpose. She knew not how far it was permitted, or how far it was a thing unauthorized to do this; but surely bribery, if other means failed, might manage it; and there they would help, not hinder her.

‘You will not mind my going, mother?’ she said, with wistful eyes fixed upon her mother.

‘Oh, my child, you shall go anywhere and do anything that will do you good!’

‘That will do me good. I will go this morning.’

‘So soon, Nell? Then you will take Kate with you?’

‘As you like, mother. There is a train at noon.’

‘Oh, my dear, I can’t bear parting with you just now, when you are in trouble. But you shall have your own way. I do not think your papa will object if I tell him it is good for you.’

‘No,’ said the girl, with a sad smile, conscious of the relief her absence would be to her step-father; ‘I don’t think he will object.’

‘If you only knew, my dear, how much he has felt for you in all this trouble lately.’

‘Oh, mamma, leave his name out; I cannot bear it!’

‘And why not?’ asked Mrs. Brereton, with a sudden access of conjugal jealousy;

‘what has your papa done that you should speak of him in that way?’

For a moment the pale cheeks flushed, and the weary eyes flashed with a sudden fire.

‘What has he done? Has he not murdered—him?’

‘You will feel less bitterly some day, Nell; perhaps learn to know your true friends from your false. But I can forgive you anything now.’

‘A friend! Oh, my God! How can I ever look at him or speak to him again without loathing? Has he not brought us both to worse than death? How could he do it? oh, how could he do it?’

She pressed her hands before her eyes shudderingly; but the next moment she raised her face, and turned towards her mother with a touching gentleness.

‘Forgive me,’ she said; ‘I—I will try to forgive everybody, even his murderers. Let me be silent, mother; how can I tell what I may say?’

A moment later the maid entered, handing her a telegram.

It was from Judith Collyer, and ran as follows:

‘Come here at once, if you possibly can. I want you.’

The hearts of the two women to whom Barrington was most dear had simultaneously yearned to be together.

CHAPTER XI.

JOHN PONSONBY, Q.C.

‘ The friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
Grapple them to thy soul with hooks of steel.’

SHAKESPEARE.

It seemed to Nell an endless drive that brought her that evening from the London terminus to the somewhat out-of-the-way region, due West, where was the modest house inhabited by Miss Collyer and her invalid friend, Mrs. Keith. She looked out upon the crowded streets, where on this grey day the gas-jets were already burning, upon the brilliant shops and passing vehicles, then upon the duller and more deserted-looking suburb roads, with a blank

gaze that in reality noticed little, and was filled with one sad vision, as was her mind with one sad thought.

When at length the cabman, after sundry false stoppages and one or two askings of the way, drew up before the little flight of steps, and Nell with her maid dismounted and entered the narrow doorway, she was too agitated to speak, and could only put her hand silently into that of Judith Collyer, who as silently led the way upstairs to the dainty little room prepared for the guest. Even here neither of the two women dared trust their voices for some moments, and it was not until Nell's trunk had been deposited, her maid received instructions, and the room cleared of servants, that at length the outward calm broke down between them. Then Judith, gently pushing her companion into an easy-chair, unfastened her bonnet

and cloak, and, taking a cup of tea from the tray just brought in by her own maid, put it on the little table beside Nell, and sat down on a footstool at the girl's feet.

Nell looked at it, then turned her eyes towards the other, and tried to speak, but her words seemed to choke her.

‘Drink it, dear,’ said Judith, with a soft tenderness; ‘it will do you good.’

Nell essayed to take the cup from the loving hands; then she pushed it from her with a great tearless sob.

‘I can’t!’ she said. ‘Oh, Judith, *I* have everything—ease and love, arm-chairs and pleasant drinks—and he—’ She could not finish, as she rose from her chair and began to pace the room feverishly.

Judith Collyer rose too, and gazed at her with her beautiful eyes full of tenderest compassion, mixed with a pure and lofty

calm that spread a ray almost angelic upon her countenance.

‘Darling Nell,’ she said, ‘it does not come by chance ; even this is the work of One who loves us—and him.’

‘Oh, Judith, I have not your faith, your religion. I cannot resign myself, I cannot think as you do.’

‘Not yet, my poor child. Who can blame you ?’

‘I wonder sometimes,’ went on the girl wildly, ‘when I shall go mad. I sometimes think that will be the end of it to me if— if— Judith, one *could* not bear it ! Oh, Judith, you love him too !’ and she raised her despairing eyes towards the other in a pathetic appeal that filled her companion’s with tears.

‘I love him, dear Nell, best of any one now living on earth, I think ; better perhaps

than any one save you can do. But I pray, as I have never prayed before, not to lose my trust in God. I have loved Him, Nell,—poorly, weakly, but still loved Him—for more than twenty years; and whatever may be His will, I believe that He will not desert His children, above all, the one whom He is now putting through the fire of affliction—it may be, in order to raise him in the next life to a place of dignity and joy unutterable that he could never otherwise have attained. How can we tell His designs? But, Nell, my darling, still, still, if we could but save him—if He would but permit us! And perhaps, perhaps—I am almost afraid to say it—but there *may* be just a breath of hope. This petition—they are working hard—so many seem likely to sign—Simon and Mr. Ponsonby are at it night and day. Surely we may hope a little, little bit.’

‘If we only might!’ cried Nell. ‘Oh, Judith, if you tell me there is hope now, don’t, don’t ever unsay it! I could not bear it.’ And, standing there, she flung her arms round Judith’s neck, and laying her head on her shoulder, found at length the relief of tears.

Judith stroked her hair softly, soothing her with touch and action almost maternal, until Nell, exhausted by her passionate grief, grew calmer. Then she persuaded her to try to rest, whilst she told her upon what foundations she based her slender thread of hope. The petition was indeed a forlorn chance, but it was the only one left to Barrington’s friends to work out; and, backed by the recommendation to mercy of the jury, and the fact that the evidence was so purely circumstantial, was at any rate worth trying.

Sir Simon De Witt and the Honourable John Ponsonby were, Miss Collyer informed Nell, the two who were to work the scheme ; and they had already set the thing going that day, and (in a hurried note received a few hours before by Judith from her cousin) reported satisfactory progress regarding promised signatures. Nobody, Sir Simon stated, who had ever been acquainted in any degree intimately with Barrington but declared it absolutely impossible, to their minds, that he could have been guilty of a crime of the sort. Two of the jury-men had requested to be allowed to sign the petition (in their case, of course, on the plea of possible manslaughter), and a well-known Q.C., a friend of Ponsonby's, had done the same, stating that in his opinion the evidence was insufficient to hang a man upon. Mr. Ponsonby had also some hopes of getting

hold of a connection of his, a peer and man of weight in the present Ministry, and whose name would be certain to have some influence with the Home Secretary.

Nell had often heard before, from Barrington, of John Ponsonby ; but neither she nor her companion had ever chanced to meet him. Already, however, he had made for himself a warm corner in the hearts of each of the two women, who, whether he failed or succeeded in his energetic endeavours, would never forget throughout their lives the work he was doing for one dear to them. They already spoke and thought of him as a friend ; for was he not Barrington's friend, and did not that bond unite them all ?

The intimacy between Mr. Ponsonby and Sir Simon was of recent date, but had come about rapidly, as the baronet himself had described to his cousin, on this wise. On

the day of the trial, when, immediately after hearing sentence delivered, Sir Simon, half blind with indignation and emotion, had staggered out of court into the street, he had knocked up, in the crowd, against John Ponsonby, less excited but almost equally agitated with himself.

John Ponsonby was never excited ; besides, he had foreseen the almost inevitable result of such a trial. His face was only a trifle paler, and the thin lines of his lawyer-like lips a little more compressed than usual, as he emerged from the suffocating air of the court, where he had just witnessed the condemnation to death of an acquaintance for whom he had a peculiar liking, and a man whom he believed innocent.

The first person who met his eyes was the unhappy baronet, holding on to some iron railings beside him like a man drunk.

and gasping ejaculations beneath his breath only half audible. He was known by sight to Ponsonby, having been pointed out to him during the trial, with a word as to his position and character; and Ponsonby had cast more than one of his keen glances towards the seat occupied by the so visibly agitated man, and had observed his staggering gait as he passed out into the street. He now, after the pause of a moment, crossed the road and touched Sir Simon on the arm. The latter looked up with a vague and troubled glare, as the other gave him his name and profession.

‘Good God!’ was his trembling and incoherent reply, ‘to think of condemning him to death! Is it possible!’

‘I am a friend of Captain De Witt’s,’ said Ponsonby, in his clear calm tones; ‘I am staying at the inn close by. Will you

come in with me and have a glass of wine?’

Then seeing that Sir Simon was really, for the moment, unable to grasp any but the one terrible idea just engraven on his brain, the other took his arm and led him unresisting towards the inn door. Here he persuaded him to swallow a glass of brandy; and then, when he had in some degree vented his emotion and exhausted his indignation, to discuss more rationally the possibility of doing something in the cause of the condemned man.

For a long time this was impossible. Sir Simon for some time found it impossible to be rational, to steady his nerves, or to regain the balance of his mind, and could only weary himself and his hearer by reiterated and incoherent exclamations of horror, and futile threats of vengeance; but at length

the cool tone and the practical intellect of his companion had its effect, and he began to listen more patiently, and to think more collectedly.

When at length, three hours later, the two separated, the elder man was to some extent reinvigorated, if not consoled. The younger had proved to him that there was still something to be done in the cause of his cousin—a something which might or might not be successful, but which at any rate was worth the trying. Sir Simon left too with a suddenly awakened sentiment of regard in his mind towards his new acquaintance, and a still stronger sentiment of reliance upon his judgment and advice. This was a sentiment inspired in most persons who had occasion to have recourse to the advice or assistance of the Honourable John. His measured, even tones correctly expressed

the keen and judicial cast of his mind, and impressed such persons much and justly. To the elderly baronet, with his impulsive and unworldly-wise disposition, he was an invaluable godsend.

Sir Simon was no fool ; in literary matters he was above the average ; in a knowledge of Hebrew and Greek he had few superiors in the country, and when a young man at college, his classic attainments and Latin verses had created for him a more than creditable name ; but from the world and its affairs he had long shut himself out, as from things distasteful, and belonging to another sphere ; and now knew himself to be, as much from natural bias of mind as from want of experience, totally incompetent to deal with this amazing and overwhelming calamity that had befallen his family. But he left Ponsonby's presence

immensely cheered, and so eager to set about working this last frail hope of the petition, that he could scarcely be persuaded to take a night's rest before beginning his rounds.

After his departure, the wine-glass stood long unreplenished before the young Q.C. His face was grave and thoughtful, and he leant his elbow upon the table, and his head upon one hand, slowly rubbing one of his eyebrows back and forwards, after a trick he had when reflecting deeply. He knew that he had inspired Sir Simon with a confidence to which he was himself a stranger.

‘What could one do? Poor beggar!’ he murmured to himself, ‘he was nearly off his head. A man of his sort collapses without hope, he couldn’t work without it; whereas I—’ He paused, and his features grew more serious still.

‘I have always told myself till now that law is justice; ay, though I have helped many a criminal to get off his dues—but there is no unfairness in that. A man must have his chance out of human fallibility. But when it is the other way— Good God! this man is innocent, if ever man were. It is horrible, too horrible, for the law to miscarry in *this* direction! He must, he shall be got off!’ and, pushing the bottle from him, Ponsonby rose from the table, his lips compressed and his eyes glittering. It was the way emotion had with him; where the features of other men softened, or were moved by agitation, his became more stern, more hard and resolute.

He rose, but not to go to rest. Calling for ink and paper, he was soon busily at work, making notes, jotting down names, and writing letters. The work was long

and apparently engrossing; but he did not seem to tire as he sat on, hour after hour, with busy hand and reflective brow, only flinging down his pen and gathering up his papers as the clock upon the mantel-piece struck two. He was habituated no doubt to late hours and busy evenings, and probably thought but little of sitting up half the night in the service of a friend. He had also been the salvation of Sir Simon that afternoon; but that was still less likely to strike him as a good action. And yet, to his guardian angel—if he had one—John Ponsonby's day may possibly have been one stamped in gold letters upon the recording tablets. But there are some people so prosaic about their good deeds, so devoid of the sentimental habit of fathering them upon the good Samaritan, that not only

themselves, but their neighbours, learn to consider them as part of the natural order of events, quite unconnected with any particular personal benevolence.

Meanwhile, in the little house in Kensington, an hour or more had passed before the subject of the petition had been fully discussed; and then Nell, on her part, had an earnest desire to confide to her friend.

‘Oh, Judith, if I could but write to him! If I could but send him a line—just one word to say how dearly I love him—to tell him how he is still to us all that is noble and dear, will always be—’ Her voice lost itself in a sob.

‘If you could!’ repeated Judith earnestly.

‘Is there no way, Judith? Oh, we must find a way! I will bribe his jailers—any sum—it is no sin I want them to do.’

‘No,’ said Judith, thoughtfully, ‘it is no sin ; although it is tempting them to betray their duty.’

‘Oh, what does that matter ? Judith, you cannot think it wrong !’

‘If I did,’ said Judith slowly, ‘I would still do it, if I could, I fear—God forgive me !’

‘Think of some way—think, Judith You are clever, you can advise me. If I could only go myself !’

‘That you know is impossible, Nell. There is only one way that occurs to my mind, and that may fail.’

‘Tell it me, Judith !’

‘We can do nothing in the matter, you and I. We are ignorant women, and understand nothing about prisons, and—these things.’

‘No,’ assented Nell, her eager eyes fixed upon her companion.

‘Therefore we must get some one else to do it for us. And it must be somebody cautious and clever. Simon would never do ; he would make a bungle and get found out. There is only one person I can think of to ask—who I think could do it if he would. But he may very likely refuse. It is Mr. Ponsonby, Nell. I have never seen him, but I am sure, from what I have heard, that if any one can do it, he can. But he may not like to do it. It is asking him, who is a lawyer, to contravene the law, and bribe its officers.’

‘Oh, Judith, he cannot refuse ; we will go down on our knees before him !’

‘We will do what we can,’ said Judith gravely ; ‘and God grant that we may succeed.’

Their plans were soon settled. Mr. Ponsonby must not be asked to come all

this distance for an interview ; they would telegraph at once to Sir Simon, to know where he was to be found, and proceed as early as possible the next morning to the address given, first sending another telegram to announce their coming to the barrister.

In times of trial the greatest aggravation of trouble is inaction. Where there is something to be done, the heart can never fall into the lethargy of despair. Necessity for action when the blow has actually fallen is the greatest help to trouble. To sit still with folded hands whilst the storm passes over us and the lightning sears our hearts, counting each pang, watching each throe—this is the extremity of suffering, the very torture of pain. Any toil, however hard, however futile, is better—above all, manual toil, which, without putting the mind to a

strain it cannot bear, tires the body out and relieves the maddening pressure of the mental weight.

That is why the poor, and men of all ranks, are to be envied in times of sorrow. The burden most likely to break the back of the victim is that which is laid upon a woman well off in this world's goods, sensitive, and reticent. For her there is no stimulating necessity for employment, no change of thought or scene—nothing but the terrible, restless repetition of her grief's refrain through the long changeless hours.

Before night came the return telegram from Ponsonby himself.

‘Come to my chambers, Pump Court, Inner Temple. I will be there at nine a.m.’

CHAPTER XII.

THE Q C UNDERTAKES AN ILLEGAL COMMISSION.

‘ O wha can prudence think upon,
And sic a lassie by him ?
O wha can prudence think upon,
And sae in love as I am ? ’—BURNS.

PONSONBY, as becomes a man of business, was always punctual to a fault. Five minutes to nine accordingly the next morning found him seated before the bureau in his chambers, turning over the letters brought by the early post, and awaiting his visitors. He sincerely hoped that they would not be late in coming, as his engagements were numerous, and he was anxious

to be off on his day's work in Barrington's cause. For this purpose he had had to relinquish many of his own affairs, and had turned over a couple of cases, which might have required his attendance in court, to a promising junior, who did devil for him when required.

He was not, as a rule, a curious person, but on the present occasion he experienced a certain curiosity regarding the two ladies he was expecting. What sort of a girl was it to whom Barrington, poor fellow, was so devoted, and how would she conduct herself during the interview? and would Miss Collyer, his correspondent, turn out anything like as striking in appearance as her photograph? On what errand had these two forlorn women come; and would it be a scene of tears, of hysterics, and of feminine emotion? He ardently hoped not; for he

was not a man inured to or experienced in such things—out of court.

When, at exactly five minutes past nine, the knock came to his door, and the pair entered, Ponsonby, aware of the long drive necessary to bring them from their region to his, and remembering the early hour, felt a sentiment of gratitude and respect for this display of that virtue of punctuality somewhat rare amongst women. As the two followed each other in, he bowed silently and motioned them to seats. Both were somewhat thickly veiled as they entered, but the shorter and slighter threw back her veil at once, and showed the small pale face which he at once recognized as the original of De Witt's photograph. It was a very pale and a very sad face; but the refined delicacy of form and feature fell pleasantly upon Ponsonby's keen gaze,

and looked strangely out of place in the squarely-furnished, legal-looking apartment by which it was framed. She spoke without hesitation, and her soft, low voice was full of a patient self-control.

‘I am Miss Collyer,’ she said; ‘we have come to ask a favour of you, Mr. Ponsonby.’

Still Ponsonby only bowed, and kept his keen eyes fixed upon her with a growing sense of pleasure. The loveliest thing in woman, he had long thought, was a lovely voice, sweet and soft and clear; and he had never heard one clearer and yet sweeter than that of this small, slight woman, with the proud, delicate-lined face. His scrutiny did not in the least embarrass her; she was unaware of it, or of anything save the errand upon which they had come.

‘I do not say to ask your advice, Mr. Ponsonby, for we are quite determined

upon it, if we can find any one who will do it for us. And I think you can, if you will.'

'And it is?' he asked quietly.

Her face flushed. 'It is not a great thing to our ideas, but perhaps you may think it so. It is to send a line, a word to him—to Barrington, in prison; nothing illegal, nothing about escaping—only a word of comfort from her,' and she bowed her head towards her companion, 'to him.'

There was a moment's pause, during which Ponsonby averted his eyes and felt hers searching his face with a pleading eagerness.

'A note, I suppose you mean?' he inquired slowly.

'A very short one—only a few words. It may not seem a thing of great importance to you; but I know how it would

comfort him. And, oh, Mr. Ponsonby, if you knew how we long to comfort him—just a little!’

There was another pause.

‘Do you know that it is a difficult thing to do?’ he asked.

‘Yes. That is the reason we came to you; we have heard you are so clever. His cousin, Sir Simon, would never be able to do it.’

Ponsonby smiled drily. ‘No,’ he remarked, ‘I shouldn’t advise you to offer Sir Simon the post of a conspirator; it wouldn’t suit him.’

‘Is it too much to ask of you, Mr. Ponsonby?’

‘Do you know that it is an illegal action, Miss Collyer?’ He smiled again at the answer, so thoroughly womanly.

‘Oh, Mr. Ponsonby, how can we think

of *that*, so long as it can do him any good ?'

He walked to the window, and began slowly rubbing his eyebrow. Why the dickens did these two poor pretty women come to him with their soft eyes and their gentle voices—to him, a lawyer, asking him to contravene the law ? It wasn't even as if the thing asked for could be of any real service to the poor fellow ; it would be a sentimental comfort, no doubt, to both parties, but of no practical use. Both by education and inclination Ponsonby had a respect for the law, and was averse to tampering with its regulations. Also, to one in his position, such tampering, if discovered, would probably put a stopper upon professional success, and perhaps destroy his career just as it was opening out before him to the display of its more ambitious

fields. He stood long hesitating and rubbing his eyebrow; so long that both women trembled for the issue of his reflections. All of a sudden he felt a touch upon his arm, and looking down, saw a sweet, colourless face looking up into his pleadingly.

‘Oh,’ whispered Judith, her lips trembling, ‘do it for *her* sake! Think of her position. And she has set her heart on it. She is so young, and her heart is breaking. I know how good and kind you are. You will not refuse?’

Ponsonby glanced once towards the distant figure—quiet, save for the clasping and unclasping of the small gloved hands; then he looked again upon the eager face, so unconscious of its own beauty, gazing up into his, and felt himself helpless. Here was bribery and corruption with a vengeance! Poor foolish women! Either of

them, he felt, would have thought nothing of going down upon their knees and kissing the very dust off his boots, if thereby they might have gained a moment's consolation, the smallest alleviation for the man they loved.

‘I will do what I can,’ he said; ‘but I cannot promise success, you know.’

‘It will succeed if you undertake it,’ said Judith, with unconscious flattery; and the smile of gratitude that flooded her face was better reward than any kissing of boots.

‘Have you the note with you?’ he asked, turning towards the girl, who had not yet spoken.

‘No,’ she said in a low voice; ‘I didn’t know—’

‘Of course not. Well, you had better write it now, and intrust it to me, and I will do what I can with it. Here is

paper; and there are pens and ink in that room. Make it as small as you can,' and he opened a door leading into another smaller apartment, where the clerk, when he appeared, was wont to sit and transcribe.

He closed the door upon her, and returned to Miss Collyer.

'Is there any hope in the petition?' she asked presently, raising her sad eyes to his.

'Miss Collyer, we have many names down. When Miss Lingwood returns, I will read them over to you both, to see if you can suggest any others.'

'No one would refuse who knew him, scarcely. Every one loves Barrington, I think.'

Ponsonby bowed his head.

'Why do you work for him in this way,

Mr. Ponsonby? Why are you so good and kind to poor Barrington?’

‘For two reasons, Miss Collyer. First, because I believe him to be an innocent man; and second, because I have a regard for him.’

‘You believe him innocent—quite innocent, Mr. Ponsonby?’

‘I do.’

‘I cannot bear to think of some signatures being given merely because of extenuating circumstances, or because they think it not fully proved; it seems an insult to him, who never committed a crime in his life.’

‘We must take all we can get, Miss Collyer. The case is too serious to admit of sentiment.’

‘Oh, Mr. Ponsonby, have you any hope that it may succeed?’

‘I would rather not say, Miss Collyer—

it is impossible to say. Such appeals do succeed at times.'

While he was still speaking, the inner door was pushed softly open, and Nell re-entered. Her veil was thrown back, and her eyes were still wet with weeping, but she put the letter quietly into Ponsonby's hand.

'Is it small enough?' she asked.

'It will do.'

She had not spent long over the writing of the few lines. She knew that she could write nothing better or more calculated to soothe him in his trouble than the simple acknowledgment of the tender and absorbing love that filled her heart; her only difficulty was to condense the words that rushed from the fulness of her heart, through her pen, to meet him.

Then Ponsonby read aloud his list, to which both listened attentively and silently,

save where either of the two put in the suggestion of another name, or a corrected address.

And then the interview was over, and the two women, who knew that Ponsonby was about to start on his work for Barrington, showed an anxious desire to depart out of his way as speedily as possible.

They would scarcely accede to his calling a fresh cab for them, and almost grudged his escorting them downstairs to the entrance. Both gave him their hands at parting, and both tried to speak their gratitude in words, but poor Nell failed.

‘Thank you—’ she began in a husky tone; but finding it impossible to control her voice, she got into the carriage hastily to hide her falling tears.

But Judith held Ponsonby’s hand in hers for a moment, and smiled a little tender

smile of mournfulness, her dark eyes full of emotion.

‘God bless you,’ she said earnestly, ‘for your kindness to her—and to him!’

Busy though he were, the barrister remained a moment standing before the entrance, staring after the cab. There was a darker shade than usual on his sallow, well-featured face, that faded slowly away as he remounted the stone stairs towards his chambers.

‘To her—and to him. Very good; but she might as well have said “to *me*!”’ Ponsonby looked for no reward for his kindly labours, yet the last pronoun would, he felt, smiling amusedly at himself, have fallen not unpleasantly upon his ear from those fine sweet lips.

CHAPTER XIII.

IS ALL HOPE OVER ?

‘Is it true, O Christ in heaven, that the strongest
suffer most ?

.
That the highest mark in Nature is capacity for pain ?
That the anguish of the singer makes the sweetness
of the strain ?’—ANON.

MRS. KEITH was a somewhat peculiar woman, who, amongst her small circle of acquaintance, was not popular. Many persons, Sir Simon amongst them—palpably afraid to open his mouth in her presence—expressed their wonder openly to Miss Collyer that she should by choice take up her abode with so unpleasant a person ; and averring their opinion that she only did so

out of a pure philanthropy and a woman's desire to sacrifice herself to somebody or something. But as Judith protested this was not the case, and that she liked the companionship of her unpopular friend, there is reason to suppose that the latter was possessed of qualities more amiable than those which appeared on the surface. Perhaps also Judith knew better than most people how many and bitter had been the trials through which Mrs. Keith had passed, and was conscious that the cold and caustic exterior of the latter concealed many a still poignant pang of suffering, both mental and physical, to which the proud spirit of the woman alluded never in words.

In person Mrs. Keith was sharp-featured, with restless black eyes, a long aquiline nose, and sallow complexion; and upon her lips there dwelt a perpetual thin smile of

sarcasm, probably merely a curl of defiance at fate, but generally misunderstood by those who conversed with her as a sneer of personal meaning. Hence, probably, the liberal measure of her unpopularity. She was thin and fleshless to emaciation, and walked with a crutch, and then with difficulty. No one would have given her credit for having been, fifteen years ago, a girl not only of a fine figure, but of a comely face. Yet such Judith Collyer, who had been her schoolfellow, remembered her ; as she also remembered her with high and buoyant animal spirits, and without the caustic smile upon her mouth. She was about the same age as Miss Collyer, although she might have been credited with another ten years. But it is not the number of years that make us look old, but the amount we live in them ; and few could

have lived more in a short time than this luckless woman.

In ten short years she had married, lost husband, children, health, and a large fortune. Her husband had been a man of means, but a drunkard and of dissipated habits; and report said that he had for some years led her an awful life before he mercifully drank himself to death and left her in peace. To no one did Mrs. Keith ever speak of that wretched time; but Judith, who knew her relations, had heard rumours of personal cruelty, of blows, of threats of murder, of attempted suicide. More than once, she believed, had the patient woman gone out at night alone to seek for her lost and intoxicated husband, to save him from death by the elements, or from public exposure; and, after nursing him through two or three attacks of that

most terrible of all disorders, delirium tremens, had watched beside his protracted and miserable bed of death. Of her two children, the eldest, a pretty little girl of six, came to a somewhat mysterious end, of which it was whispered that a blow from its drunken father was the primary cause ; whilst the other, a boy born after its father's death, wasted gradually away, only surviving a few weeks. And when Mrs. Keith, after the removal to the graveyard of her infant, rose at length from her bed, it was found that she was become miserably crippled — through too long standing in her husband's sick room, or perhaps through attempting to raise him, said the medical man.

Not long after Mr. Keith's death, she had discovered that the comfortable income which she had fancied hers was more than

half melted away in foolish speculation. With her usual energy, she made an effort to remedy this by new investments, but she had scarcely done so when these also failed largely, and she found herself reduced to utter poverty. She had been accustomed all her life to ease and luxury ; but now she was thankful to put up her horses with her old schoolfellow, and contribute her modest quota to the economical little household at West Kensington.

When, after taking off her outdoor dress, Judith entered the sitting-room where Mrs. Keith sat keeping guard over the delayed breakfast, the quick eyes of the former readily discovered that it was one of her companion's 'bad' days. Mrs. Keith was subject at times to sharp attacks of suffering, the result of her disease. On these occasions, however, she never made a com-

plaint ; it was only the increased depth of the lines about her eyes, and the added sharpness of her tone that betrayed her. At such times Judith's manner was always more gentle and conciliatory even than usual ; and now to-day, with the pressure of her present trouble upon her, she had sympathy to spare for her friend's physical sufferings, as she bent down and kissed the sallow, pinched cheek affectionately.

‘ Well, how about your wild-geese chase ? ’ inquired Mrs. Keith, to whom Miss Collyer had confided their intentions already the night before.

Although perhaps not naturally of a very communicative nature, there was little that passed in her daily life which Judith now concealed from her companion. She had been driven to this course by the abnormal sharpness of the latter's wits. As it was

impossible to hide anything in the long run from Mrs. Keith, when once she had made up her mind to ferret it out, it had seemed more graceful to make a virtue of necessity and confide in her at first. Mrs. Keith had made no remark last night upon the proposed expedition, but this morning she seemed inclined to be captious.

‘So he is the model of all the virtues, this new friend of yours, I suppose?’ she remarked, when Judith had finished her brief recital.

‘I don’t know about that, but he has a good heart, I am sure.’

‘A lawyer with a good heart! A wolf without an appetite for flesh!’

‘Mr. Ponsonby isn’t a simple lawyer, he is a barrister.’

‘I never heard of a “simple” lawyer in my life yet, my dear; at least not one who ever got any business.’

‘It is the fashion to run down some people,’ said Judith quietly—‘lawyers and mothers-in-law and old maids. They differ quite as much as other people, so far as I can see.’

‘What made you go to this stranger, and not to the devoted Simon?’

‘Because I thought a clever barrister a better person to do it than an unworldly man like Simon.’

‘You are right,’ laughed Mrs. Keith, who never lost an opportunity of sneering at the baronet—for some reason or other always an irritant upon her nerves; ‘poor dear Sir Simon’s wits are scarcely of the finessing order!’

‘He is a very clever man in his own way, Marion, as you know,’ remarked Judith, as she poured out the coffee, unselfishly keeping up the conversation, about which she

cared nothing, because she knew that nothing relieved her companion's pain more than an argument.

‘Clever!’ retorted Mrs. Keith. ‘Cleverness is a drawback to one’s prosperity in life. You and I are both clever, Judith; and what have our brains done for us? If you hadn’t been clever enough to see their deficiencies, you might have settled down happily with one of your well-to-do lovers, instead of vegetating in a little London villa at forty pounds a year rent; and I, if I hadn’t thought myself too clever to take any one’s advice, I shouldn’t first have married a man whom every one but myself saw I never could reform, and secondly, shouldn’t have made ducks and drakes of the last half of my income, by fancying I could manage business affairs in my own way.’

‘When,’ interpolated Judith, ‘you were saved from absolute beggary by the assistance of a sensible and upright lawyer.’

‘Quite true ; the exception only establishes the theory.’

At this juncture Nell came in, and was introduced to Mrs. Keith, both of them merely bowing in silence.

Mrs. Keith was not by nature a sympathetic person ; at any rate she was not demonstrative ; and after one sharp glance from her keen eyes towards the girl, she took no further notice of her. If she had not too much sympathy, however, she had plenty of tact, and Nell felt grateful to her for her matter-of-fact manner, as she spoke occasionally to Judith on household or other matters. It might sound trivial, almost cruel to talk of such things to one whose near relation lay under sentence of

death, but the cool every-day words and manner were in fact the wisest restraint and tonic for over-burdened minds. Nell herself was more self-possessed than she had been since first the blow had fallen ; she desired only to be let alone, and silently, all day long, revolved in her mind with a faint tension of hope the few words uttered by Mr. Ponsonby in the morning.

And so the days passed on, and nothing further of note occurred. Twice Judith had heard from Sir Simon, and once from the barrister, on the subject of the petition. Sir Simon had been very hopeful indeed in his letters—every one had welcomed him and sympathized with him, and been anxious to sign the paper. He seemed to forget that the longest roll of names does not insure a man's release. Mr. Ponsonby was more cautious in expressing his opinion.

He merely remarked that the petition was popular, and added these words, which were of great comfort to both Nell and Judith—‘Tell your friend that her commission has been successfully fulfilled.’

Then came the day when, as both knew, the petition was to be given in to the Home Secretary. And after that the suspense seemed to drag more heavily, and the anguish of waiting grew more intense. It seemed to Judith, looking back afterwards upon that time, that those two or three days had been to her simply one living cry of entreaty to the God above to spare poor Barrington. To Nell it seemed as if she could not even pray ; the world passed by her in a dream ; she eat and drank and moved and lived as if it had been some one else, and as if she herself were the incarnation of one terrible fact, one changeless

state—the fact and state of waiting, of uncertainty. Oh, how could any man be so cruel as to delay so long the decision that meant life or death, not to the prisoner only, but to those who loved him so dearly !

Then came the last day—and still there was no answer, still no sign of a reprieve, no word of a changed sentence. And if no word came that day, on the morrow Barrington must die. He, an innocent man, must die a degrading and disgraceful death. Would the justice of heaven permit such iniquity ? Alas ! the justice of heaven was not at human beck and call ; such things had before happened, and would happen again. This was not the first time, nor would it be the last, in all probability, when a guiltless man would stand upon the scaffold, condemned by his fellows to death ;

and as he took his last breath of the Creator's air, and felt the fatal noose round his neck, would call vainly upon the mercy of heaven in that final moment.

Another letter came from Sir Simon that afternoon, and it was as despairing in tone as the others had been hopeful. The Home Secretary had sent no reply ; he had apparently not stirred in the matter. All hope was over ; they were bent upon the murder of an innocent man ; nothing remained for his relatives but horror.

Judith did not show this letter to her companion ; indeed she doubted if Nell would have followed the reading of it. It seemed as if nothing now, save the glad news of a reprieve—hope almost extinguished—could rouse the girl from the lethargy of her trouble. What would become of poor Nell were the awful fact to be

consummated? Would she lose her mind in the terrible shock? Judith's heart was torn between her unutterable yearnings over the two of whom she thought almost equally—the strong young man whose last day on earth it was, and the girl beside her, from whose white lips came no sound of lamentation.

And so the morning grew into afternoon, and the afternoon into evening, and still there came no news. And Judith's face grew old and pinched in those few hours of intense suffering; yet her faith in Providence and her unselfishness towards her fellows failed not. Whenever, during the endless hours of that darkened day, she left her knees, it was to watch with unobtrusive anxiety over her companion.

Even Mrs. Keith's harsh voice was hushed to-day, and there was a brilliancy in her

eyes that spoke of suppressed and excited feeling. To her Judith owed a suggestion which came as a moment's relief upon that consciousness of inaction and of inability to do anything which oppressed her so painfully. Nell had just risen from her untasted tea—her white set features looking like a mask to her companions—and had left the room; and Judith, uncertain whether to follow or to leave her in solitude, had at length broken down, and, hiding her face in her hands, let the streaming tears run through her fingers. To her, as to Mrs. Keith, there had seemed something incongruous and horrible in the sight of this mute girl, affianced to the man who was to be executed on the morrow, sitting in meek patience beside them at a social meal. And yet anything was better than that she should sit alone upstairs in her silence and her

misery. It had been a wet and gloomy day, and now, although little after seven, darkness was falling fast. The bells from the neighbouring steeple were going for evening service, and mingled with the drip, drip upon the pavement outside.

‘Why not take her to church?’ asked Mrs. Keith suddenly, her high voice falling sharply on the silence.

Judith lifted her head with a start.

‘It will be better for her than sitting doing nothing,’ she added, as Judith rose from her seat.

‘Thank you,’ said the other, as she dried her eyes, ‘I will ask her to come,’ and she went upstairs.

A few minutes afterwards, Mrs. Keith saw them both descending the steps, and followed them with a gaze contracted by the pain of past memories.

‘Is there no limit to the capacity for human suffering?’ she murmured to herself. ‘God knows I thought no trouble in this world was ever so sore as mine, but this is worse. And yet—my little bonny Elsie! No! mine was more bitter; there is no sin mixed up with this trouble of theirs!’

Judith had found no difficulty in persuading Nell to accompany her to church. The girl merely bowed her head, and passively suffered her companion to dress her and lead her out. There was little fear of meeting with any acquaintance in this suburban church; and as the two women crept silently into a dark corner near the door, Judith at any rate felt the solemn calm of the dimly-lighted nave, the soft harmonies of the organ soothing in some measure to the restless agony of her sorrow.

She feared it was not so with Nell. The girl rose and knelt in her silence impassively, as if in a dream; but at last she roused Judith by a touch, and lifted a pitiful face towards her friend.

‘Suppose,’ she whispered, ‘it were to come whilst we were out? Oh, Judith, let us go home!’

Alas! Judith had no faith now in that long-awaited-for ‘it’; she was resigned now to the worst: but, urged by the demands of those eyes of agonized entreaty, she rose and led her companion out of church, back through the dripping, steaming streets, back into the little house where all was as they had left it, where no news of respited death had arrived to rouse it from its atmosphere of woe. And Nell went slowly, with dragging footsteps, up to her room, to sit in her chair silently, with folded hands and fixed

eyes ; to sit out the hours till when ? Till the morrow which was to see her lover die.

There is a degree of physical pain which reacts upon itself, and, from the simple inability of the human frame to bear more than a certain amount of suffering, induces for a time unconsciousness and consequent relief. It is the same with a mental strain. When the cup is full, it can hold no more ; and a too protracted and intense agony dulls the heart's capacity for suffering, and results in temporary apathy. But, alas ! the mental opiate rarely lasts out the duration of the pain ; the victim reawakens all too soon to the consciousness of the keen-edged knife probing his inmost soul.

When, after the household had retired to rest, and Judith once more opened Nell's door and crept in, she saw the girl had at

length moved. She was kneeling in the middle of the room, both hands and eyes upraised, but no tears upon the colourless cheek, nor any sound coming from between the white lips. Over the mantelpiece hung a large engraving of the Crucifixion, and it was towards this that the motionless figure raised hands and eyes. She was evidently unconscious of Judith's entrance ; and, after a moment's indecision, the other left her and went out softly. Again she went in two hours later, but this time Nell turned slowly towards her, whilst the smothered words of entreaty came with difficulty from her lips—'Leave me !' And Judith obeyed, feeling that sorrow has its sacred right of solitude.

She did not come again until the dawn had already made its way for half an hour or so through the dim atmosphere of a rainy

London morning ; and then she went in more softly than ever, hoping to find the poor weary girl asleep. For a moment she was terrified at seeing the motionless figure still in the same place, but now half lying, half crouched upon the floor. Had the girl died there where she knelt ? She went up hastily, and as she put her arms round the prostrate figure, saw with a great relief the eyes open and gaze at her.

‘ I have tried,’ said a voice that sounded hollow and far away, ‘ to kneel so all night. I told Him,’ and she turned her haggard eyes towards the figure on the Cross, ‘ that I would kneel all night before Him if He would save his life. Why can’t I ? Let me alone, Judith.’

Was she wandering in mind ?

‘ Nell,’ said Judith solemnly, ‘ this is wicked ; you must get up. You have done

it—you have knelt all night. Look, it is morning now.'

She lifted her up, and the girl staggered to a chair.

'Not to bed; let me sit here,' she said. 'Yes, it is morning—and to-day he dies. Christ has not heard me! But,' and she raised her ashy face with a wan smile on it, more inexpressibly sad than could be any tears, 'I don't so much mind now, Judith, because I know I shall soon go to join him. Don't cry, poor Judith. I think he is happy too now; I know he will be brave and good. They murdered Christ, you know; so why should we think it odd a man should be murdered? Perhaps that was why Christ didn't hear me. He was keeping a place near Himself for him—for—Barrington——'

Judith felt sure that the over-wrought

brain was wandering, and for answer she only drew the brown head with its disordered hair towards her, and laid the young lined face tenderly against her shoulder.

Two hours later she was still kneeling beside Nell's chair, when suddenly a loud peal rang through the house.

A messenger at that early hour could surely come only upon one subject! Then, as the door opened, and Sir Simon's voice was heard in the hall, Nell grasped her arm convulsively, and Judith's colour came and went.

'I will go,' she whispered as she rose hastily. And only as she reached the bottom of the stairs did she see that Nell was following her.

At the doorway of the little dining-room stood Sir Simon.

'Is it—' gasped Judith, unable to say more.

‘It is—it is a reprieve!’ he replied, and he seized a hand of each. ‘And a reprieve means commutation of sentence. Oh, God be thanked!’ he added, the tears running down his face.

‘God be thanked!’ she echoed. Then she suddenly turned towards her companion, who had sunk upon a chair, her face buried in her hands. ‘Leave us, dear good Simon, for a few moments,’ she said; ‘I will come to you in the drawing-room.’

‘I could not be here before,’ he said; ‘I heard late last night, but too late to come to you. I have been sitting up all night till I could bring you the news.’ And wiping his eyes, Sir Simon retreated.

‘Nell,’ said Judith, bending down her face to the bowed head, ‘do you hear it? There is a reprieve!’

‘I heard it,’ replied Nell almost inaudibly.

‘Oh, Nell ! they say he is safe now, that the sentence will never be carried out, that he is saved— Do you understand, dear Nell ?’

‘He is quite safe ? They will never do it now ?’ asked Nell, in the same voice, raising her face.

‘Quite safe, Simon says. Oh, Nell, my darling, God heard our prayers after all !’

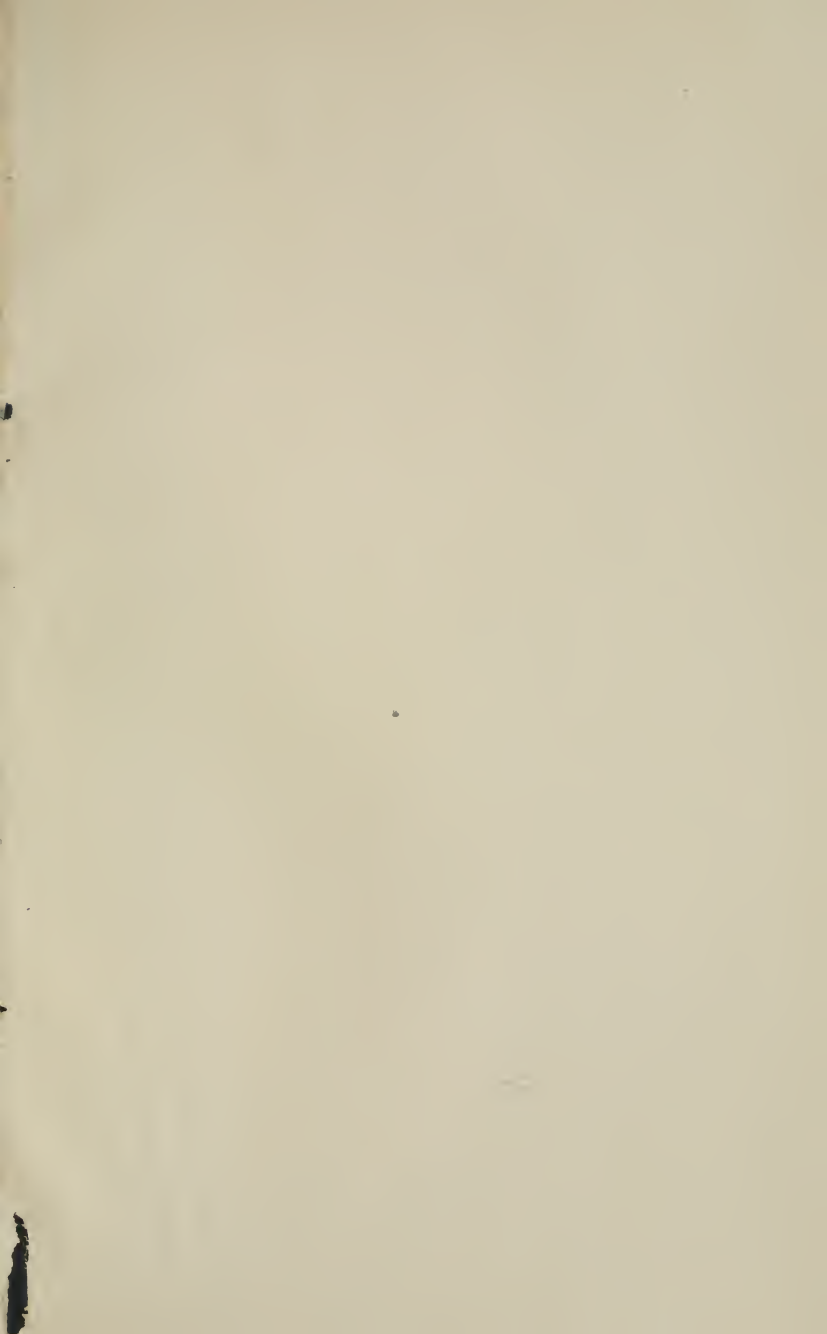
Then a sudden tide of colour swept across the corpse-like features, and Nell leant back in her chair, trembling so violently that it seemed almost as if she would fall face forwards. But Judith’s arms were round her, and Judith held her fast, pressing lips full of blessings to the bent head, whilst blinding tears of relief fell from her eyes.

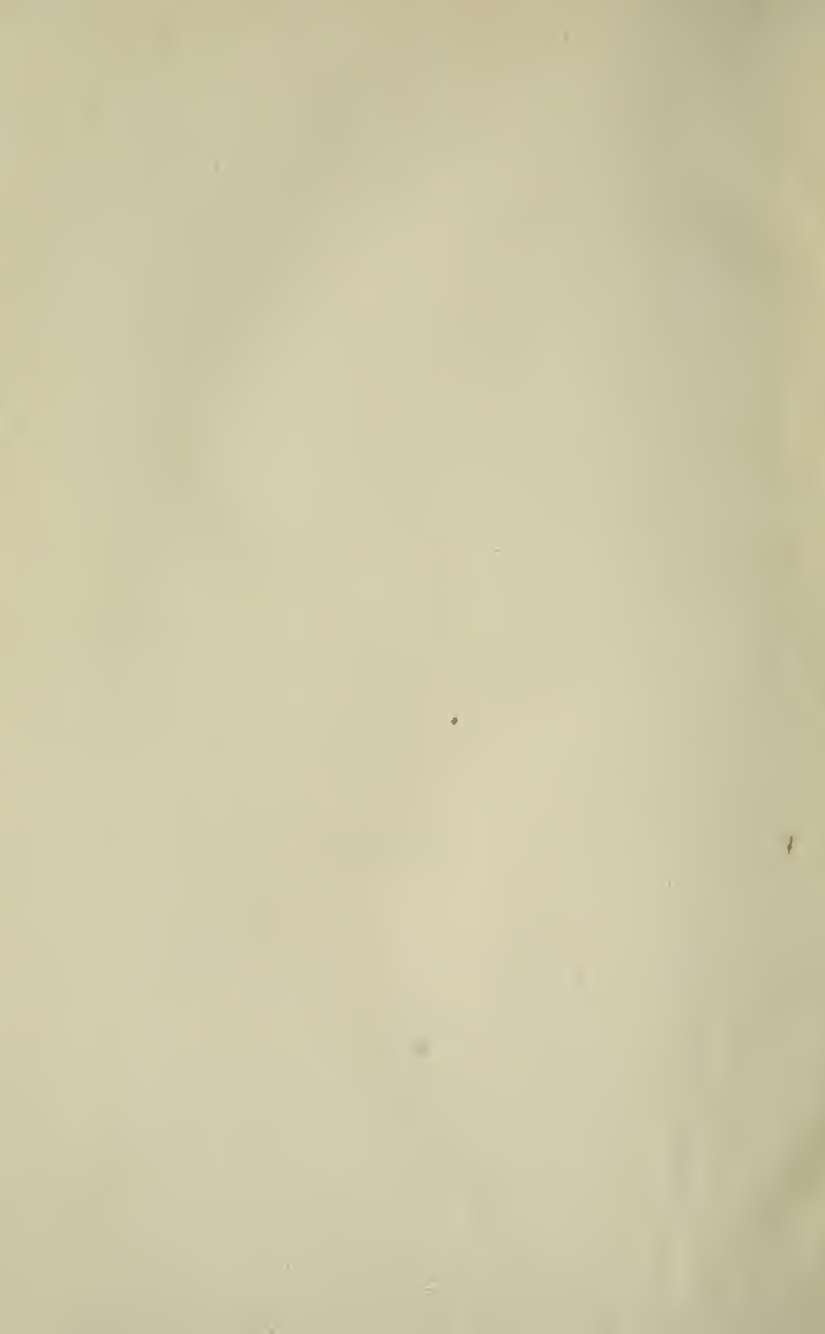
Safe—saved ! To what ? Now in the first moment of relief that question had not as yet presented itself.

But there must come a time to the friends of the reprieved man when they would realize that the sentence of penal servitude for life, if less terrible to them than the sentence of death, was to the prisoner merely a life in death, a prolonged agony of suffering more cruel than death itself.

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